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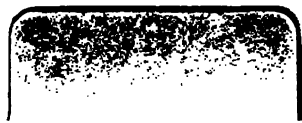


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The
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BY ANNE ARREINGTON TYSON

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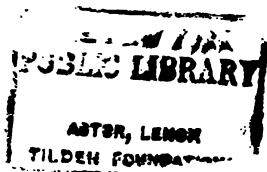


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THE PRICE OF HONOR

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"A ROUSING CHEER GREETED HER WORDS."

THE
PRICE OF HONOR

BY

ANNE ARRINGTON TYSON



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THE PRICE OF HONOR

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tion. Advertisements were inserted in all the big dailies; detectives hired and two continents scoured but all to no purpose. The girl was never located and not even a clue was discovered as to the kidnappers. When, after months of search, the girl was still unlocated, it was believed she met foul play. The parents were prostrated. Later, it was rumored that the mother died broken-hearted and that the father became a drug-fiend.

Time dims misfortune as distance softens the rugged hills and Kent and the Valleries, rarely discussed, were forgotten. Then, suddenly, like a star bursting in the heavens, after two years of hiding, Warner Kent flashed back into his world. His absence was never questioned, for, without the least difficulty, he resumed his old place as head of the money trust. But this was only for a time for morphia had gripped him till it wrecked him financially, physically, mentally. Then he went back into hiding.

How quickly men and women make their exit from the stage of the world! Yet how strange is life! How curiously pregnant with startling and dramatic coincidence! Oftentimes those thought to be in their graves suddenly re-appear upon the scene of action. So it was with the Valleries father and daughter, at least the man with her said he was her father. They had come back to Christian, miserable, poverty-stricken and unbefriended. And Douglas Marling found them!

It was on a bitterly cold night, purely by accident and at a crucial moment that he discovered Clematis Vallerie, the poor little thing, tortured by the obsession of fear.

For a time, after he had brought her to his home to live and receive his protection, she seemed afraid of

him. Then little by little he won her confidence. He realized that some day she would be a woman and the world would question his right to care for her and her privilege to receive his protection.

Being a man of high sense of honor, Marling determined to right things at once and so, girl as she was, made her his wife, Reverend Archibald Hunt reading the Episcopal service. At the time, Clematis was barely conscious of what took place. Indeed, she was so upset that immediately after the marriage, she was seized with a distressing illness that lasted for weeks. Day and night Marling watched at her bedside, fearing for her. It was through his unceasing attention, however, that she was wooed back to life.

When she grew to womanhood, people began to speculate as to her relationship to Marling. Even though his sister Alicia and her husband, Horace Gebhard, were in his house, the fact that he had kept that early marriage secret, made it seem doubtful that Clematis should live beneath his roof.

"Now since Clematis is a woman, she has no further claims on you," observed Gebhard. The three were in the library, Marling having just returned from an interview with Joseph Houlman, head of the Commercial League and owner of a chain of cabarets and gambling stalls.

"She has all the claims in the world," answered Marling promptly, "and you know it."

"Then you really mean to acknowledge her?"

"Yes. I intend to let the whole world know what she is to me."

"Of course there will be another ceremony," continued

Gebhard. "If she doesn't love you, she will at least marry you for your money."

"Ah," smiled Alicia, "since Clematis is so in love with Anthony, why not let her marry him? He, certainly, is a good match for her."

A shadow passed over Marling's face and he lifted a hand as if to dissipate it.

"Clematis," he said slowly, "is free to love and marry as she chooses."

"Has she seen the evening paper?" Gebhard asked hurriedly and with feigned indifference. In The Evening Chronicle had appeared in glaring headlines:

DOUGLAS MARLING A MARRIED MAN
WIFE UNACKNOWLEDGED

"No. I—I burned it," returned Marling a little unsteadily. "I did not want her to see it. I want her to learn the truth from me. Where is Clematis?"

"She is dining at the Irvings', I believe," Alicia informed him.

"A nice guardian you make, not to know where the bird has flown," Gebhard remarked.

"Take care to mind your own business," Marling rebuked severely. "I have not seen her since morning and had quite forgotten she was dining out. How long, Alicia, has it been since she left the house?"

"About an hour, I suppose," was the answer. "The Irvings live out, you know. They are not in town this year."

"Did she go alone?"

"How should I know? I don't bother myself about her."

Marling looked reproaches. He had done all, been everything to Alicia, yet she very nearly repudiated him. Though he had meant it for her happiness by keeping silent about that early marriage, he had unconsciously placed Clematis in a bad light. When he spoke, his voice was tense and quivered with strong emotion.

"That is unkind, Alicia," he said. "You could at least concern yourself about her occasionally."

"I don't propose to interfere in my brother's affairs," she replied curtly. "Why don't you let her marry Anthony and so hush up the reports that are floating about town? Everybody's talking and if you feel you are responsible for *her* happiness, you should right the wrong you are doing her."

The words probed deeply. They burned like tongues of liquid flame.

"God knows," he said with some effort, "I will right the wrong if I can. If she loves Anthony, she has my consent to marry him tomorrow."

"You say you are going to tell her the truth. She should have known long ago," observed his sister nonchalantly, noting the shimmer of light among the pearls on the front of her gown.

"Yes, I know," answered Marling slowly. "I shall tell her everything." Yet not all, not everything. There was one thing he would keep from her, one thing she should never know. It lay hidden in his soul and would be buried with his body. He remembered there were two others who knew but they dared not speak. As he recalled the two who knew, a menacing frown darkened his features and piercing gleams shot from his wonderful

grey eyes. "Yes," he added harshly. "Clematis shall know. She shall decide and—"

The sentence was chopped off suddenly, for there reached the three the sound of pelting stones. Window-panes crashed into a thousand pieces, bits of glass flying in every direction. Cries and curses from an angry, jeering mob, rent the air, cries for Marling, the district attorney.

"Down with the district attorney! Down with him! Send him to hell!"

They had come, the pirates, and were bombarding the house. Joseph Houlman had turned down his thumbs.

"Oh, what is it? Something dreadful is happening!" cried Alicia frantically. "What does it mean?"

"It's a—a—mob," stammered her husband in explanation, greatly frightened and trembling visibly.

"A mob!" she exclaimed verging on hysteria. "A mob! Why are they here? What can they want?"

"Th-they want yo-your brother," faltered Gebhard. "You see he's fighting the Commercial League and they want him to combine with them or quit fighting and, since he won't do either, they mean to put him out or have blood."

Pistol shots rang out and bullets whistled through broken window-panes. Then there came another burst of jeers, yells and sickening vituperation.

"Oh! Douglas, Douglas, I begged you to leave those cabarets and gambling stalls alone! see what you have done!" cried Alicia.

"Go to my study or the drawing-room," he commanded sternly.

"Oh, Horace, go, speak to them! See if you can't

pacify them," she begged. Gebhard demurred, then ventured to the window and cautiously looked out. When he saw the lawless, excited men standing in the snow and noted how their blood was up, he was alarmed. Indeed he was so terrified that he shut the window with a crash, and was about to draw back, when a ball of ice and snow slashed through the pane of glass and struck him full in the face. Alicia screamed and vanished from the library to the drawing-room. Gebhard ground out an oath and, hastily brushing ice and snow from his eyes, followed his wife's example.

Douglas Marling heard the jeering cries of the men and quickly donning his great fur coat, hurried out to meet them. When he appeared in the outer vestibule, the crowd surged forward, like hungry wolves maddened by the sight of prey. One struck at him, but a man, standing near, parried the blow and hurled the assailant heavily to the ground. Marling glanced kindly at the big fellow who had done him the service and was surprised when he recognized Robson, Father Gleason's man-servant.

On the outskirts of the mob were three men, Beverly, Anthony and Father Gleason. The three moved nearer, threading their way till they reached the steps and gazed in wonderment at the strong manly figure facing the mob so courageously, the moon lighting his features and crowning him with a sort of halo. For a moment the priest stood amazed, then moved up a step or two, his keen, watchful eyes fixed on Marling's face.

Grey Seaborn and a few of the police who were sprinkled in among the throng, stood idly by. Seaborn and his under-men were allies of Joseph Houlman.

They knew him to be a man of money, a man of power and wide political influence, that he could, at will, dismiss or hold them in their present positions. What did they care about Douglas Marling, the newly appointed district attorney? In the lawless attack upon him, Marling saw Seaborn. For an instant the eyes of the two men met, then the head of Christian's police cowed, and wedged in and was lost among the crowd.

Then—all was silence! Marling, lifting his eyes, beheld a woman coming toward him. *It was Clematis!*

A cloak of fine ermine, immaculate as snow, enveloped her, even to the hem of her skirts. Over her head she wore a filmy embroidered scarf, while her hands were hidden in the sheltering softness of a great white muff. With cheeks flushed, eyes glowing like summer stars, she passed between the files of men and seemed unalarmed. Father Gleason went forward to conduct her to Marling but she courteously declined his escort. It was he who had seen her and given the signal to the men to let her pass. He had known her since she was a child and had watched her with more than ordinary interest, under Marling's care and guidance, mature into glorious womanhood. Even now he watched her and so did the rest of the men as she glided by and passed swiftly up the steps to Marling's side. The Priest followed closely, and stood near her. Laying her hand lightly on Marling's arm, she glanced up quickly, questioningly into his eyes.

"Why are these men here?" she asked hurriedly, her voice, quivering tensely.

"They are Houlman men," Marling told her in low, vibrant tones, "and they want to whip me into line."

For a moment she stood there, her face in her muff, then looked up and met Marling's gaze.

"Come, Clematis, you must go in. This is no place for you," he said firmly.

She met his eyes determinedly. "I will not go in," she returned with decision. Seeing that it was useless, he said no more. Instead he tried to speak to the men but they clamored furiously and hushed him up.

Then Clematis spoke. Ah! what a voice was hers!—a god-given voice. The men listened, bewildered, then drew back and stood silent. Oh! the wonder, beauty, infinite sweetness in a woman's voice!

"Men," she said gently, "Mr. Marling is your friend. He wants to be one of you. He *is* one of you! If you will let him, he will always be your friend. He is kind and human and just. Douglas Marling is a man of the people!"

Strange to relate, a rousing cheer greeted her words. The tide had as suddenly turned in Marling's favor as it had gone against him. A woman's magic gentleness and charm had done the trick. Though they had come, but a moment ago, in a belligerent spirit, even to kill Marling, the men now shouted lustily for him. They knew he was a man for human rights. Bravely, womanly, Clematis had faced them and conquered! Marling was amazed.

He looked down into her face, her eyes glowing, and, for the two, the moment thrilled with electrical intensity. Father Gleason drew near, a supercilious smile on his shaven lips.

"You are wonderful," he said smoothly, in the lull that ensued "Wonderful!"

Clematis drew back a little. She had never liked Father Gleason, had always regarded him with suspicion.

"Thank you," she said.

Another burst of cheers rent the crisp night air. The inciter of the demonstration was Robson, Father Gleason's man-servant!

"Douglas Marling's a man! He'll do the right thing!" cried a big fellow in the thick of the crowd. It was Grey Seaborn, and his under-men took up the cry and echoed it. Many rushed forward to shake his hand, then all dispersed rapidly save Father Gleason who lingered for a moment, scrutinizing Clematis, his keen, observing eyes searching hers as if he would find her soul, then turned abruptly to Marling and held out his hand.

"You have won a great victory," he said, glibly, "a great victory!"

CHAPTER II.

For a moment, Marling and Clematis lingered. It was sweet to idle in moon-dreams. Father Gleason gone, Clematis felt relieved.

"I distrust him," she said nervously. "I—I almost hate him."

"He's a good sort, I suppose. But don't think of him."

"They didn't hurt you?" she asked hurriedly, looking up at him.

"No," he answered, meeting her eyes and noting the beautiful play of opal in them.

"I am glad, so glad," she murmured under her breath, averting her face, for it burned fearfully. Perhaps it was the cold night that made her cheeks tingle. A throb of joy shot through the man at her side. Would she have cared if they had hurt him? Did she care for him? Silently he slipped his hand into the great white muff and caught one of hers.

"It's warm here," he observed with a laugh.

"It is warm, isn't it?" she answered, letting her delicate fingers curl softly about his and she, too, laughed.

"Come, let's go in," he said, and he led her into the house. In the reception hall, they met Garland. The old man seemed a bit frightened.

"Have they gone, sir? I tried to get to you, sir, but they wouldn't let me."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Marling almost sternly. "They might have killed you, the devils!"

"They didn't hurt you?" Clematis questioned quickly and anxiously.

"No, Miss. Did they harm you, sir?"

"No," returned Marling, divesting himself of his great fur coat.

Clematis put aside her muff, removed the embroidered scarf from her head and allowed her cloak to slip away from her till she stood free in her evening gown.

"Dinner is served sir!" announced Garland. "You were out, sir, then the mob came, so I kept it waiting."

"That was good of you, Garland," observed Marling kindly.

"Yes, so thoughtful," said Clematis with a smile, then she and Marling passed into the dining-room which was elegantly finished and appointed. The old servant smiled as he followed them.

Clematis had not dined. Now as she seated herself at the table, she was reminded of a most distressing experience. An hour ago she had gone to the Irvings' for dinner, Mrs. Irving having urged her to come, but when she arrived at the Irving residence, she was confronted with the startling announcement that the affair was indefinitely postponed. For a moment, she was dazed. With supreme effort she mastered herself and when she awakened to the reality of things, she discovered she was still standing in the vestibule of the Irving residence and that Mrs. Irving's man, with rigid features, was saying calmly:

"Mrs. Irving bade me say to you, Miss, there will be no dinner tonight."

"No dinner!" she exclaimed under her breath.

"No, Miss. It's been called off because they all sent

regrets at the last moment. Mrs. Irving meant to telephone you but —”

With a shock, Clematis realized the truth. She knew now why it had happened, what it all meant. At first she wondered why her friends were dropping her. She knew Marlings views had been basely distorted and she believed it was because of his extreme ideas. Her woman's intuition told her it was something more than his views, that it was *herself*! For the veriest second, she buried her face in her hands. A sob rose to her lips but she forced it back. Another moment, she rushed from the house, entered her limousine and was driven home. On first impulse, she thought of confiding all to Marling as, when in childhood, she had carried all her troubles to him, but no, it would only distress him. When she reached home, she beheld a great angry mob cruel in it's intent. Then she saw Marling facing the men quietly, intrepidly, and she took courage. As she descended from the car and passed through the files of men, she forgot all about the wretched incident, forgot everything except that she must reach Marling's side and do what she could to pacify the mob.

Now as she sat there at the table, scarcely tasting the delicious cream soup, the incident recurred to her and she paled, colored vividly, then paled again. Marling noted the alternate play of color and quivering of her lips, and fain would have questioned her but, on second thought, desisted. He knew something distressed her but he preferred voluntary confidence. He wanted her to come to him, as she had done in the old days, and tell him everything.

At this moment Alicia and her husband came into the room, moving cautiously.

"Have they gone?" she questioned fearfully.

"Yes," her brother answered.

"Are you certain they have gone?" inquired Gebhard, still apprehensive, approaching the table.

"Quite certain," returned Clematis. Being assured that there was nothing to fear, the two seated themselves in their accustomed places, and Garland served them with soup. For a time the courses progressed in silence, the old servant bringing on delicate viands with wine, and salad golden in mayonnaise.

"You were brave to-night, Clematis," said Marling suddenly, looking at her as she sat across from him.

"Brave?" she laughed and colored slightly. "I never thought of myself."

"Of course you didn't. You never think of yourself."

"She saved you from those devils," said Gebhard, his fork poised.

"Yes, you saved me, Clematis," returned Marling. "You endangered your own life. Why did you risk so much?" he questioned eagerly, leaning forward and gazing searchingly into her eyes.

"I did it because," she faltered hurriedly, her breath coming and going quickly, "be-because—you are my—*good* friend."

Alicia laughed.

"Grazia!" she exclaimed. Gebhard joined in his wife's merriment. Clematis was startled. What did it mean? She did not quite understand. Marling vouchsafed no answer, bit his under-lip and wearily passed his hand over his eyes, shutting out from him the

sweet happiness of a love scene. It was obvious now that Clematis loved Anthony. Marling drank his coffee hurriedly and rose from the table. Then they all adjourned to the library.

"The windows are broken. It might be cold here," said Marling.

"No, it is quite warm," answered Clematis. "Let us stay here."

Marling replenished coal and stirred the fire till it burned ruddily and the room was warm and cheery, despite broken window-panes.

"You will have new glass put in the windows before my party, won't you, Douglas?" asked Alicia.

"Certainly. That can be done tomorrow."

"You won't let me have your study?"

"No. You will have the whole house. That room I reserve entirely for myself."

Alicia had begged him for the use of it, but he had peremptorily refused. The room was his holy of holies and it was the privilege of few to visit it. It was Clematis, however, who went there every day to place a vase of flowers on his desk.

The three scrutinized her now as she stood there in her white gown, a spray of starry blossoms in her hair. Gebhard, particularly, kept his eyes on her and smiled. How beautiful she was! Yet he meant to make her, this woman, bend the knee to him, perhaps grovel at his feet.

"Why did you come home, Clematis? I thought you were going to dine at the Irvings'," observed Alicia in silvery tones.

"Ah, the bird returned early, I wonder if she brought

back an olive branch?" sneered Gebhard. Marling shot a fierce glance at him. Alicia laughed softly.

"Why did you come home?" she queried. Clematis sank back into a chair and paled as white as her gown. The remembrance of her painful experience upset her completely.

"I—I—" she faltered and her voice broke.

"You are not ill?" Marling inquired solicitously, bending slightly above her.

"No, no, not ill but——"

"But what?"

"No accident?" questioned Gebhard suavely.

"No accident, Mr. Gebhard," she answered, then rose incontinently, crossed slowly to the library table and buried her face in among the roses and clematis, drinking in their wondrous sweetness. "No, there was no accident," she repeated, returning and leaning against the chair she had vacated.

"Then why did you come home? The dinner wasn't over?" insisted Alicia, eager for the story. She was sure there *was* a story.

"No, no, the—the I—I came home because I—I wished to," Clematis stammered painfully. Alicia's lip curled.

"Oh, what an excuse!" she smiled.

"Something distresses you, Clematis. Tell me what it is," Marling importuned.

"Something dreadful has happened, Douglas, and she won't tell you," ejaculated Alicia, impatiently, piqued because of Clematis' evasiveness.

"Won't you tell me, Clematis?" insisted Marling gently. He was keenly anxious about her. He knew something had happened, for she seemed distressed. What if some

one had been rude to her, grossly insulted her? *What, too, if she had seen the evening paper?*

"Possibly a man's inadvertence pained her super-sensitive nature," interposed Gebhard, a thin smile playing about his lips. Marling's eyes scintillated angrily.

"Clematis," he said, "look at me. *What* brought you home?"

"The—the—dinner was—was indefinitely postponed," she stammered.

"Indefinitely postponed and at the very last hour?" exclaimed Alicia in breathless astonishment.

"Quite unusual, for the Irvings'," interpolated Gebhard with a low mawkish laugh.

"Yes, most unusual," echoed Alicia. "What *could* have been the reason? Had all the guests arrived?"

"I—I—was there," came faintly from Clematis. Alicia smiled serenely.

"Of course *you* were there," she gurgled. Then she laughed softly, ripplingly. Alicia laughed beautifully when she chose. Now she chose. Something struck her as extremely mirthful.

At this point, Garland entered with a note on a silver salver and presented it to Gebhard.

"A note for you, sir," he said.

For a moment the white envelope lay upon the salver. Gebhard recognized the handwriting, surmised its message and was beastly mad.

"Give it here," he growled, snatching the missive and tearing it open. When he had done reading, he crumpled the delicately perfumed bit of paper and flung it to the flames, but instead it fluttered along the floor and lit upon the hearth-stone.

"What is it, Horace? Anything wrong?" inquired Alicia. Gebhard rudely ignored his wife's question and turned fiercely to Garland.

"Why do you stand there like an idiot?" he demanded truculently. "There is no answer."

"I was told to fetch one, sir," came in quiet respectful tones from the servant.

"Confound you! There is none," the infuriated man flung back. "Say that I will answer in person."

"Yes, sir," and, without another word, the old servant turned and withdrew.

"Horace, Horace, what is it?" questioned his wife, laying a detaining hand upon his arm. "What is it? something has wofully upset you. Something is wrong!"

"Out of my way," he said harshly. "A man hasn't time to waste explaining things to women," and he thrust her aside roughly and speedily left the room. Hot tears welled to Alicia's eyes and burned down her cheeks.

"How I *hate* him!" she breathed. "He will yet disgrace me by his maudlin and monetary entanglements."

Then, as a thought flashed through her mind, she smiled and with feline movements crossed to the hearth-rug and, stooping down, seized the note her husband had meant for the flames. Before smoothing out the crumpled sheet, she glanced furtively at Marling who was still speaking with Clematis, persuading her to confide in him.

"Won't you tell me, Clematis," pleaded Marling earnestly. He noted that her lips quivered and that she turned away, unable to meet his eyes.

"No, no, it would—would do no good," she answered. "Please, please, don't ask me."

"Why do you refuse?" he asked impatiently. "As your—your guardian, it is my right to know."

There was a painful silence; he waited for her to speak, but not a sound passed her lips. He saw her quiver as if in pain and once more bent down near her.

Suddenly an exclamation, ever so low, broke the stillness. When Alicia smoothed out the crinkled sheet and read it, a little scream unconsciously escaped her. The two looked up startled.

"What is it, Alicia?" asked Marling. The woman controlled herself with an effort.

"Oh, it—it is nothing," she murmured. "I—I am simply tired to death, that's all. I think I shall go to bed," and she yawned wearily.

"Good-night, Douglas. Good-night, Clematis. I am so glad you are not ill," and she laughed her low, beautiful laugh before going out and closing the door.

"Now Clematis, tell me all," he entreated when they were alone. Clematis controlled herself with supreme effort, then laughed nervously.

"What a persistent man you are!" she said lightly. "Though you stoutly deny it, I verily believe you possess a world of curiosity."

She still evaded and Marling was piqued by her evasiveness. He caught her hands in his and held her before him.

"Tell me what happened at the Irvings'," he commanded almost sternly.

"The—the—dinner was—was——" she faltered, then broke off, quickly withdrawing her hands and turning away from him.

"Well!"

"It was called off because—because——"

"Because what."

"*No one came!*" she whispered, jerking out the words hoarsely. Marling ground his teeth.

"The vampires!" he muttered savagely. "Why didn't they come?"

"I—I don't know," she breathed painfully. "Mrs. Irving's man told me everyone sent regrets at the last moment. Oh, you don't know how I felt," she went on in distressed tones. "It was fearful, simply unbearable. I was never in such a wretched position before in all my life." Then after a moment she burst out: "I see it now! No one came because—because *I would be there!*" and she bowed her head in her arms and sobbed.

Marling heard and the words cut into his soul like steel blades. It had come to this and through him. In extreme agitation, he strode up and down the room. He had wronged her in not letting the whole world know. What good would it do to tell her now? No, he would wait until Alicia's party, then acknowledge her his wife. Then if she repudiated him, she would, perhaps, marry Anthony and he, left alone, would travel, wander about the world a solitary man and live out his life in some God-forsaken spot. The thought was maddening. Slowly he re-crossed the room and stood near her. He longed to take her in his arms and unburden to her the one secret of his soul, but he dared not. When Alicia left the room, he switched off the lights and there was only the beautiful fire-glow.

"There, there, Clematis, not altogether repudiated," he breathed tensely. Then he went on in rasping tones: "It is not because of you but because of *me*: because I dare

to have opinions and express them boldly. Mind you I am a *man* and *not* a *sheep* to tinkle and follow whither-so-ever the world bids come and go. I have opinions and choose to assert them. If a man deviate from the path of convention, he is pronounced a lunatic, condemned a criminal! One must needs metamorphose one's self into a sheep or a goat to tinkle and follow in the wake of the common mind. One dare not stray from the old path to find a new one and see what lies beyond. But I say," he added emphatically, "be not a sheep, an automatic copyist, be a leader and let men copy you! Make a new path and let others find and follow! Because of my views I am spurned, denounced a dangerous man fit only for a mad-house. Think of that!"

Clematis lifted her head and looked at him.

"No, no, you are not like *that*!" she cried. "You *could* not be."

"What a loyal woman you are," he said, looking down at her. "Who knows some day you, too, will lose faith in me!"

"No never!" she exclaimed. "Never would I lose faith in you, my best friend! I don't care what are your views; what you *are*, I—I will *trust, always believe in you!*"

"You say that now but you don't know, *you don't know!*" he said huskily.

"I do know, I do know!" she cried in hurt tones. For a moment, the man's eyes looked into those of the woman.

"Clematis," he said, "you know my views concerning marriage but they are not in accord with the world's convention. "Marriage," he continued earnestly, "is the sacred union of man and woman. In my soul, I believe

that so surely as a man and woman pledge their love, their eternal faith, they are man and wife, whether or no there be priest or parson. In the eyes of God it is marriage no matter the world's verdict. The union of Abelard and Heloise was binding and as holy as marriage to-day among the Kings of the earth. *The marriage service merely does not make the woman a wife!* Man's vicious, meddling spirit must needs tamper with and break the laws of God!" Then he went on in bitter satire: "*It is he and not God*, who joins the man and the woman! If there be no parson, no witnesses, the man and the woman are spurned, driven out as one having leprosy. Man makes and breaks, binds and unbinds to suit his whims. It is *he and not God*, who is in *authority!* If Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah came upon earth, straightway they would be adjudged sinning against man's law and at once a parson would be summoned to unite them in holy wedlock! In the far days," the man pursued, the woman listening, "there was no priest, no parson to bind woman to man, man to woman, but they, perhaps in the tender glow of a paling sunset, or 'neath the amber gleam of silent stars, plighted their love, their eternal faith and, in the eyes of Him who is the Beginning and the End, they were one, man and wife. There was no parson to speak a form, no witness to substantiate their vows, but in the sight of God it was *marriage* and He sanctified it. Then marriage was sacred; today it is an empty form!"

For a moment, Marling stood waiting. The shadows deepened and the silence was freighted with sweetness of clematis and roses. For a space the man looked down at the woman, then, bending toward her, took her

head between his hands and gazed searchingly into her eyes until the opal depths dropped before his earnest scrutiny.

"Ah, Clematis," he said in deep tones, "you must wed the man you love according to man's law, the world's custom. There must be a parson and witnesses; there must be a white gown and veil, music and flowers. In short there must be everything to make you a legally worldly wife!"

Clematis whitened, her lips twitched and she turned from him. What did he, could he mean? Just a moment ago he had spoken his belief in the old days when a man made a woman his wife; now he asserted that she must conform to custom and wed according to man's law, modern ideas of marriage. Perhaps he meant that now, since she was a woman, she had no further claim on him and he was relieved of all responsibility; that she must find for herself a husband and make her home elsewhere. For years she had known this man's care, and now, it seemed, he wanted to be rid of her. The knowledge shocked her terribly and it was like the thrust of pointed steel in her heart. She could not go yet. No. She would first make arrangements; find work and a boarding-place.

For the veriest second she thought of Carl Anthony who pursued her with dogged persistence and the thought chilled, frightened her. She did not shirk work, did not hate being poor. Anything was preferable to being Carl Anthony's wife.

She turned away so that Marling could not see the quiver of pain that passed over her features. The silence was tense, unbearable. After a little she dared

to look up into the face of the man who stood near her; a face that spoke honor and hatred for petty, unholy things. And as she met his deep, scintillating eyes, she wondered if he could, if he did want to be rid of her. What if she had wronged him by such an imagining! He could not want to be rid of her, surely not, after all his goodness. No, she would not think it again, would not believe it of him.

"And you," she almost whispered. "If—if—you should——?"

For an instant Marling waited, emotion almost mastering him. Then he wheeled incontinently and walked to the farther end of the room.

"No, no, Clematis," he said, his voice breaking perceptibly, "I—I—can—can make no woman my wife at least not while—not now. Love is the one sweet thing in life I have coveted, but which I dare not reach out for, must put far from me."

A faint cry, almost a sigh, fluttered from her lips, but low as it was and even with his back to her, Marling caught it.

"Oh, why not? Why not?" she breathed. "Why can *not* you have love?"

Unsteadily he turned and gazed wonderingly at her. Did she love him? For the barest second a mad joy shot through his whole body then with powerful effort he fought it back.

A sob broke in her throat.

The man was surprised, a trifle bewildered. He heard the break of pain in her voice and he could almost swear that something more, something deeper than gratitude provoked it. He had not calculated on this. He had

counted on other things; counted on her love for Anthony, on her marrying him or some other man. Now a torrent of happiness nearly swept him off his feet.

"Look at me, Clematis," he said hoarsely, bending toward her.

For the fraction of a second she gave her eyes unreservedly to his. Suddenly he caught her hands and held them fast, then abruptly let them go, moving away from her.

"I know a man," he began tensely, "who married a young girl, a mere child, and never acknowledged her."

There was a deep silence, harrowing in suspense. Marling's face twitched while he waited.

"How wicked!" exclaimed Clematis under her breath. "How could that man sacrifice one so young? Why didn't he wait until she grew to womanhood?"

Marling bit hard into his under-lip. Hope was gone now. He fore-saw in her eyes, her woman's hatred, supreme contempt. He went on doggedly: "The man married her to save her from a beast, a libertine. *He did it to—to—save her from her—father!* He never regarded, never once treated her as his wife. But he *was good to her.*"

"He never acknowledged her," she interposed severely. "Was that being kind, *good* to her?"

"No."

Marling simply ground out the monosyllable.

"Why didn't he acknowledge her? Was he ashamed of her?"

"No."

"Did he care for her?"

"Yes, he *cared* for her."

"Does he care now?"

"Yes, *she is his life, his very soul.*"

"Then why doesn't he acknowledge her?"

"Because he wants to win her, *to win her.*"

The words were uttered bitterly, unsteadily. Clematis wondered why he was telling her this wretched, wretched story.

"Doesn't she know she is his wife?" she questioned hastily.

"No, she doesn't know," replied Marling with some agitation, then continued in hard tones: "When she married, she was a victim of *amnesia*. Later she was seized with a distressing illness and when she recovered, she had *entirely forgotten*. Even now she does not remember."

"Pitiable! Distressing!" exclaimed Clematis, in tense, quivering tones, strangely affected by the story. "If I were she, I should not regard it a legal marriage. Very likely he doesn't intend to acknowledge her. Maybe it was a *fake* marriage!" Her words sounded cruelly, brutally and they went deep, probing to the quick.

"My God! Clematis," Marling burst out, "do you think I——every man is a beast and a devil?"

"But he is hurting her," she cried, "hurting her painfully, cruelly, irreparably."

"He means no wrong by keeping silent," said Marling in dead tones, his temples throbbing, his head aching dully. There was a strained silence. He knew she was right; that he was wronging her irreparably, inexpiable. His hands clenched and the nails dug deep into the palms, creasing narrow red lines. He had virtually told her all; that she was his wife. It was palpable that the whole incident had

become, to her, an utter blank ; and that, in order for her to remember, he must recite everything in detail.

"Does she care for him?" she asked a trifle unsteadily.

"No, she doesn't love him," Marling shot back fiercely. "Do you think she could?" he questioned bitterly.

The room was still, very still, and the shadows lengthened, darkened, deepened to purple. The coal dropped with a gentle thud in the grate ; the fire had burned low to a beautiful red with little flashes of violet flame. Impatiently Marling stirred the glowing embers, and watched new flames burst into life, burning brightly, yellowly, still waiting for Clematis to answer. He listened breathlessly, feverishly, and while he waited the faint sweetness of roses and clematis came to him, thrilling, maddening him.

"No, I should hate him," she said.

CHAPTER III.

THIS MORNING the sun-god shone warmly, luminously into the drawing-room, touching everything with golden finger tips. Caressingly he pressed ardent lips to the beautiful white marble Briseis which seemed to respond, fairly glowing under his passion.

The grand piano stood open and books, sheet-music and flowers were scattered about in artistic profusion. It was essentially a woman's room with a woman's luxuriousness and used almost exclusively by Clematis. It was here that she had smiled and dreamed dreams; and here, too, that she had wept tears and stilled her heart-pain. In childhood days she had gone to Marling with her heart-aches but now since she was a woman she cherished them alone.

She did not know that even now Horace Gebhard was lying in wait to have his tilt with her; that he was going to tell her something, which if the world knew, would calculate to injure, possibly wreck her own as well as the life of the man who had befriended, been all to her. Gebhard figured out that, if she knew, she would pay almost any price for silence to save Marling and herself disgrace. With this end in view, he sought her in the drawing-room, but instead he found his wife. Alicia held in her hand a crumpled sheet which she had guarded jealously for sometime. It was the note her husband had received, the crinkled bit of paper he had meant for the flames but which she had picked up from the hearth rug in the library. It was the old, old story of a man promising a woman money and not keeping his

word. In the note, however, there was no mention of money. It contained but a single line with the appendage—(P)—and ran thus:

"I shall not fail to see you the night of the party."
'P'.

Who was P? Alicia, for the life of her, could not fathom the name of a single person beginning with the letter, P. Then suddenly it flashed across her that the note might be from a woman. Horace had had entanglements and there was always a woman in the case. She remembered, too, that he was pressed for money; that he had done his best to extort it out of Marling and now he meant to entrap Clematis, and, if necessary, resort to the last means and not spare her. If he succeeded and secured the money, what was he going to do with it? Did he intend to turn it over to P? Or some other woman? For a moment, Alicia was perplexed, then she laughed suddenly. An idea which had once before occurred to her now flashed through her mind and she gurgled softly. Clematis, probably, would procure the money, but *she*, Alicia, would give it to him. Yes, *she*, would be the one to tender it to her husband. She laughed again as the idea recurred to her and her silvery tones floated out in birdlike ripples.

"Something pleases you, Alicia," observed her husband coming into the room at the moment. "What is the joke?"

"Oh, it's a trifle, a mere trifle," she answered gaily. "You know, Horace, bagatelles unconsciously annoy you, and just now I don't choose to upset you," she added sweetly. The man shrugged his shoulders.

"How considerate of you!" he sneered.

"Must not a good wife be considerate of her husband?"

she questioned cheerily. There was another shrug.

"Why don't you consider other things, say, a man's pocket-book?" he cut back impatiently.

"I certainly consider yours, Horace. You give me nothing, not even to a pair of shoe-laces."

"I am not here to pick a quarrel," he said in vexed tones.

"Neither am I," responded his wife nonchalantly. There was a slight pause. The woman shifted the conversation.

"By the way," she purred, "have you seen her?"

"Seen whom?"

"Clematis, of course."

"No, I haven't had a chance at the girl."

"Do you think she will accede to your demand?" the woman asked pleasantly, watching the play of amber light that glowed and warmed the marble Briseis. A thin mawkish smile parted the clean-shaven lips of the man.

"Oh, there is no doubt of it," he returned confidently. "I have no fear on that score. She will get the money. Trust her for that!"

"And then?" pursued his wife, questioningly, lifting her eyebrows.

"Then—well, then——" responded her husband musingly, "I shall pay my debts."

"*Really!* Then you *do* mean to pay down the money, doubtless present P. with the whole of it."

The man started violently. There was a sort of tightness in his throat, and a nervous quivering seized him. What *did* she know? Had Marling lied to him? Had he told her all, everything? No, it couldn't be. It had lain hidden too long! Damn him and the devil burn his soul if he had! For a space Gebhard stood rigid as

a marble caryatid, then ventured to glance at his wife who toyed with a bit of ribbon and seemed utterly unconcerned.

"What do you know about it? he demanded roughly. Alicia still toying with the bit of streamer, evaded the question by putting another.

"Didn't you get a note?"

"Well, what if I did?" he growled.

"It was from P., I believe," she purred, watching him narrowly.

"Did you read it?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"The devil, you did! What business was it of yours to read my notes?"

"Oh, none, I assure you. I simply wanted to read it and I did. *There!*"

"That's the way with women, always doing things they've got no business," he breathed angrily, his eyes aflame. "What have you done with it?"

"Here it is. You are welcome to the thing," she replied, recrushing the daintily perfumed sheet and handing it to him. "For my part, I have no desire to read any more of your horried notes."

"You'll never have the chance," he flung back, casting the bit of paper into the fire and watching the yellow flames lick it up greedily as Apicius, in the old days devoured a salad. "No, you'll never have the chance," he repeated heatedly, "for all of my notes and letters, henceforth, will be sent to my office or the club. I promise none shall ever again be brought to this house."

"Very well. As you please. That is your affair," responded his wife lightly. "Send them all anywhere

you like. I must say," she added acridly and with hidden humor and pretense, "P. is—is—very ungentlemanly. H-he is coming here the night of my party and I haven't invited h-him. The impudence! Quite rude of *him*, I should say."

"Yes, er—er—quite *ungentlemanly*," assented Gebhard nervously. There was a brief silence, then the woman questioned purringly:

"You arranged matters satisfactorily with—with—him?"

"What satisfactorily?" her husband questioned fearfully.

"About the money, I mean."

The man hesitated.

"Oh, that's all right," he answered boldly. "The—the party promised to wait on me."

"That was kind of—of *him*," she gurgled. Then: "You won't forget, Horace, about my party, my Greek evening? It's to be tomorrow night, you know. You won't forget, will you," she insisted sweetly. How could he forget when the affair was to be to-morrow night and the house was in a turmoil, upset by florist and decorator?

"No, I shan't forget, I promise you," he returned gallantly. "Trust *me* to make it an *event* to be remembered!"

"Thank you, Horace. That will be good of you," she murmured softly.

"By the way," she burst out, after a moment, "I haven't invited P. to my party. Who is—is *he* anyway? I really can't place *him*. I can't recall one person even whose name begins with P. Really, I don't think I know *him*."

Gebhard was nettled almost beyond endurance by her tone of raillery.

"No, of course you don't," he answered angrily.

"Oh! And you won't tell me who *he* is?" she persisted, scrutinizing him through narrow lids.

"No, why should I? You've no right to know."

"I have."

"You haven't," he flashed back.

For a second the two glared at each other, then Gebhard saw a smile play over his wife's features and heard little trills in her throat. All the time she had had suspicion that P. was a woman. Now she knew, for if the writer of the note had been a *man*, Gebhard, certainly, would not have minded letting her know. Just now there darted through her brain the name of the woman, and as it flashed across her, the name was not unfamiliar to her. She had even seen the woman and thought her beautiful.

"Then you won't explain about the woman?" she hazarded. It was a bold stroke and went true. Trust a woman for risks and hitting the mark. The man was appalled, almost taken off his feet. Did she *really* know or was she simply playing, trying to probe him? When he recovered a bit, he ventured to look at her. She met his gaze steadily, a little smile in her eyes. Then she laughed silvery ripples which incensed and harassed him beyond reason. What feline creatures women were!

"Then you really mean not to explain?" she asked.

"By the devil! I will explain nothing," he flashed brutally.

Alicia went straight up to him and gazed searchingly into his eyes as if she would probe his very soul.

"Then don't," she flashed angrily, speaking hurriedly, "I know the woman. Her name is *Pappeia Ardeth!*"

CHAPTER IV.

AT THIS point Douglas Marling came into the room to find Clematis. He seemed wretchedly worn and his pale sensitive face quivered with suppressed agitation. His eyes were as dark stars clouded by the night mist and, in the shadowy masses of his hair, the few gray strands glinted silver-white in the morning glow. He had come to tell Clematis the truth, the one secret of his life, but when he entered and discovered she was not there, a sigh of relief broke from his lips as if a great burden had been lifted. Alicia studied her brother's face, then, remembering the note, seized the moment.

"Oh, Douglas, do you happen to know a woman by the name of Pappeia Ardeth?" she asked. "You know," she went on excitedly, not once glancing at her husband, "Horace is always in financial straits and some time ago and purely by accident, I found a note addressed to him and I supposed it was from Madame Ardeth. In the note, she stated she would not fail to be here the night of my party. Did you ever hear such impudence! I haven't invited her and do not even know her except by sight and what I have heard of her. Do you know her?"

"I don't make it my business to know your husband's acquaintances and keep in touch with his disgusting entanglements."

"You do know, Douglas, you *do* know," she exclaimed in vibrant tones, "and you are keeping things from me."

"I don't trouble myself about your husband's affairs, I tell you," he answered sternly. "I don't bother to keep

up with *his* friends. They are entirely out of my class."

Though he winced under the stinging retort, Gebhard felt relieved, infinitely relieved. For once he was grateful. Marling knew all, everything, but did not choose to expose him. After a moment Alicia put aside her anger and laughed softly. She knew enough of the story to satisfy her own curiosity and inflame her hatred for Gebhard. However, she would curb it and do anything to pacify him until after the party. Then, well, then she didn't care what became of him. "Oh, well, keep your secret," she said, nonchantly. "I am sure I don't care a rap about it," and a faint smile still hovered on her lips.

"Where is Clematis?" Marling asked abruptly.

"She hasn't come down yet," responded Alicia.

"Over-indulgence," sneered Gebhard. Marling simply ignored the remark. He did not care to have words with his opprobrious brother-in-law. Incontinently he turned to his sister.

"You are going to have Clematis receive with you tomorrow evening at your party, your Greek evening, as you call it?" he asked, fixing his eyes narrowly on her.

"No, *indeed!*" she replied with some heat. "Of course not. She will *spoil* everything! Was it not on her account that the Irving affair was called off? No indeed, I won't have her!"

"Not even when you know what she is to me?" Marling questioned huskily.

"*We know! Everybody knows!*" cut in Gebhard scathingly.

A fierce red gleam shot into Marling's wonderful gray eyes.

"Take care!" he said imperiously.

"You know what Clematis is——"

The sentence was broken abruptly, for at that moment, Clematis came into the room. She was white and worn and her eye-lids drooped as if she had lain awake for hours. Somehow these last few weeks she had had forebodings of the great shadow that was about to cross her life and darken its bright horizon. The mob incident, the sudden calling off of the Irving affair and the story of the man who married a young girl and never acknowledged her, all tended to distress her. Intuition told her that Marling was going to tell her something and she felt that what he had to say to her was distressing and, fearing to cause her pain, he was silent. Even now in spite of weariness and her disturbing forebodings, she spoke brightly.

"Good-morning, everybody," she said cordially.

"Good-morning, Clematis," greeted Marling warmly, and as he spoke, he noted that her eyes were a deeper, intenser blue.

Gebhard merely nodded.

"You look done up from the dissipation of the Irving affair," he observed with a touch of mockery.

"You forget, Mr. Gebhard," she said lightly, "that Mrs. Irving called off the dinner that night and I came home early."

"Pardon, Clematis. That was weeks ago and I had forgotten," he returned in drawling tones.

"It is too bad you are aging," she observed. "You know a failing memory is a positive indication of almond locks or an insane asylum."

Marling laughed. Gebhard contorted his features in an ugly scowl while Alicia turned and faced her.

"Do you want to know what we were quarreling about just now when you came into the room?" she asked.

"Yes. Do tell me. Perhaps I might act as peace-maker."

The elder woman's lips curled like little rose leaves.

"Don't hurt her, Alicia," said Marling sternly and in an under-tone.

"Maybe I had better not tell you. Douglas entreats me not to pain you."

Clematis gazed at her questioningly. Was she to know the truth and from this woman? A thousand times she would rather have heard it from Marling's own lips. She gave him one grateful glance, for the veriest glimpse of his deep gray eyes always seemed to calm, to buoy her.

"Do tell me, Alicia," she insisted. "It is good, so good of—of—anyone to consider my feelings. But please don't mind. Do tell me."

"To be plain-spoken," returned Alicia, keenly, "we were discussing *you* and, as usual, when you are the subject of an argument, it ends in an ugly quarrel."

Marling saw Clematis grow white and her eye-lids twitch. He tightened his lips and breathed hard.

"So you were quarreling about me?" said Clematis in the quietest tones, "I am sorry." Then she went on carelessly, trying to speak lightly, "I thought by your manner something of importance was being considered. Since I was the topic, I don't wonder at your being a little more heated than if you had been discussing Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Brown."

"We were debating whether or not I should have you at my party," said Alicia spitefully. Clematis felt relieved. She was glad it was that and nothing more.

The faintest sigh passed her lips, then she smiled one of her wonderful, rare smiles.

"Oh, were you?" she mused. "It was *really* good of you to think of *me*."

"You don't mind if you are not asked?"

"No, indeed, I don't mind," and crossing the room, Clematis buried her face in a cluster of pink hyacinths adorning a mosaic table exquisite in color and design. "Oh, you beautiful, beautiful flowers!" she murmured softly. Then when she turned away, Marling noted that she had caught the wonderful pink tint of the blossoms. "Really, Alicia," she said smilingly, "I haven't given your party a thought. I am glad you don't want me. It is good, so kind of you to remember how I hate being *bored!*"

"No one is ever bored at *my* affairs," Alicia snapped promptly. "I think you and Douglas are hurt because you're not wanted."

"You may think as you choose about me," responded Clematis, "but as for Douglas, he said, last night, he was glad you hadn't asked him and hoped you wouldn't."

Alicia was piqued and turned instantly to her brother.

"Did you say that?"

"Yes. And furthermore, I wouldn't give a—a—continental to be at your Greek affair."

"Nobody wants you," she flashed back angrily.

"I am glad," he responded coldly.

"If you, my lady," she said, with a tentative smile, addressing Clematis, "become Mrs. Carl Anthony in the meantime, that is, between now and tomorrow evening, I shall be charmed to have *you* at my party."

"Thank you, Alicia, but I don't choose to come under

that condition," replied Clematis with a serene smile. "I haven't the least intention of becoming Mrs. Anthony."

"No," sneered the other, lifting her eye-brows. "Then you shouldn't lead the man on."

"I am not leading him on."

"Oh, but you are. You accept gifts from him."

"You are mistaken, Alicia. I do not accept gifts from him."

"Who was it then sent you those hyacinths?"

"Marietta bought them for me."

"Oh, Marietta bought them for you?"

"Yes. I instructed her to buy them."

"Oh, I didn't know," murmured Alicia pursing her lips. Then she added cuttingly: "Since you are being so talked about, it is noble, quite noble of Carl Anthony to want to marry you."

"It is noble of him, isn't it?" responded Clematis, a hint of unsteadiness in her voice, her breath coming and going with nervous quickness.

"Since you are so madly in love with him," continued the elder woman, "I can't see why you don't marry him at once and have it over."

"I—I—don't choose to become his wife," faltered Clematis with a quiver in her voice, her breath still coming and going quickly as she spoke.

"Even if you don't choose, Douglas should compel the marriage," cut in Alicia stingingly.

Clematis shuddered and clasped her hands nervously against her breast. Involuntarily she lifted her eyes to Marling's, then veiled them again.

"You wouldn't force me to—marry him?" she breathed very low, her voice dying away.

"No, not against your will, not if you did not love him," he answered, essaying eagerly to gaze into her eyes as if he would search every secret chamber of her soul and find the truth hidden there.

"Rot!" sneered Gebhard, addressing Clematis. "What does he care about *your* love and *your* happiness?" Then turning swiftly to Marling, he went on, speaking cruelly as if he joyed probing to the quick, pointing his finger at Clematis: "What do you care about *her*? Why don't you acknowledge her your——?"

"Stop!" commanded Marling. He lifted his hand imperiously, menacingly.

"Stop!" he repeated vibrantly. "It is *mine*! That secret is the one sacred thing in my life."

CHAPTER V.

THERE was a breathless moment. Clematis white to the lips, clasped her hands in a strained movement before her. She felt that something was wrong, palpably wrong and that she was the cause of the imbroglio. It was plainly evident to her, too, at least, she so imagined, that she was unwanted and unloved. But there was no alternative except to remain in Marling's house until after the party, then she would go somewhere.

With arms folded across his breast, Marling leaned against the marble Briseis. His eyes scintillated a new happiness, a wonderful elation, but this Clematis did not see for she scarcely dared look at him. She knew there was something in his life; something which concerned her which he had kept from her but she must know sooner or later, perhaps—*now!* What was it? What could it be? Her heart palpitated fearfully, agonizingly. Finally she glanced up and at once noted his almost transfigured countenance. For a moment she held her breath in wonderment, then, she, the woman, caught the glow from the man's eyes and lit a wondrous light in her own. Slowly, deliberately she strode across to him and, for one brief second, gave her eyes trustingly to his.

"I believe in you!" she said tensely.

The man, leaning against the marble Briseis, was shocked with joy. He felt little chills steal over him so like those one feels when suddenly conscious of the wonderful changes in the Parsifal Overture. The words,

"I believe in you," thrilled, pierced through him. They told him of that rare, marvellous thing, a woman's trust, a woman's beautiful faith. As he gazed down into the face of the woman so near him, he would have taken her into his arms, but, at that moment, Garland ushered in Sylvia Sterling, who came swiftly into the room, then, perceiving the tenseness of things, paused in doubtful hesitation. The tension, however, was finally relieved by Alicia who advanced quickly toward her, with hands outstretched.

"How do you do, Sylvia, dear?" she greeted effusively. "I am charmed to see you." Then she added regretfully, "What a pity I must go now just as you have come! I have an appointment with Madame Dunne for a fitting and you know what a creature she is for moods. I am having a new gown for my party to-morrow night. It's to be a Greek evening, you know, and I am so glad you're coming," she supplemented with a lovely smile.

"Indeed I'm coming!" exclaimed Sylvia warmly. "You always give lovely affairs and I hear this one is going to be beautiful, simply *wonderful!* Jack and I wouldn't miss it for *worlds!*"

"I am *so* glad!" smiled Alicia. "Now I must go. You will excuse me, won't you, dear? You know what a tyrant Madame Dunne is."

"Yes, I know," assented Sylvia. "She can be the—the—devil some times," and she laughed charmingly.

"Adieu, Sylvia, dear."

"Au revoir, Mrs. Gebhard."

With a smiling nod and a seductive swish of skirts, Alicia Gebhard swept from the room. Sylvia then approached Clematis, who, leaned against the piano, her

slender fingers on the ivory keys. The two kissed fondly.

"I am so glad when you come, Sylvia," she said with a hint of unsteadiness. Quietly and unnoticed, Marling passed into his study, while Gebhard remained, standing beside the mosaic table, listlessly toying with a book of poems, his devilish eyes fixed scrutinizingly upon Clematis.

"Thank you, dear, I am always glad to be here," murmured Sylvia sweetly. "You know Jack and I called last evening.

"Yes. Garland told me when I came in. You don't know how sorry I was to have missed you."

The two women talked carelessly and lightly, discussing fluffy and pretty nothings, leaving the man entirely out of the conversation.

"Quite brilliant outside," he observed suddenly, a tentative smile on his lips.

"Yes, glorious," assented Sylvia.

"I suppose you heard, Miss Sterling," he cut in decisively, "that the Irving dinner never came off."

"Never came off!" she exclaimed in affected amazement. "What *could* have been the matter?"

A malicious smile played about Gebhard's mouth, then he answered, speaking the words slowly as if they tasted good to him: "*The guests—never—came!*"

"Oh!" murmured Sylvia under her breath. She glanced wonderingly at Clematis. "Why didn't they come, Mr. Gebhard?"

"I regret, Miss Sterling," he returned with patent significance and smiling mawkishly, "I can offer no explanation."

During this colloquy, Clematis remained silent. At

Gebhard's words, she colored vividly, then paled suddenly. Sylvia, always tactful, at once recognized the situation, and dropped the subject.

"Clematis, dear, won't you play me something?" she requested gently. "Something from Chopin. I love him, and you have such wonderful temperament. You do interpret him so beautifully."

"Thank you, Sylvia. Chopin, too, is one of my favorites. He is my one consolation," answered Clematis, her eyes drooping slightly and her delicate fingers loosely interlaced, but not seating herself before the instrument.

"Do play the *Berceuse*," insisted Sylvia, "or the beautiful *Polonaise* in D flat I love so dearly."

Clematis only smiled faintly and, despite her efforts, a mist of tears gathered in her eyes. She glanced down at the piano to conceal her emotion.

"Please don't ask me to play. I—I—don't think I could now," she said agitatedly. Sylvia Sterling did not press her.

Still fingering with feigned indifference, the open volume of verse, Gebhard kept his eyes on Clematis. He saw plainly she was laboring under stress of emotion. A long, ominous silence pervaded the room; a silence prophetic as it were, of impending tragedy. Clematis felt the constrainedness of the moment. For weeks she had had premonition and for nights she had lain awake, but, not for all the world, would she let Marling know.

A keen repulsion and sudden trembling seized her as she caught a glimpse of Gebhard standing there, his ponderous body careening against the table of Florentine mosaic. A savage gleam shot from his eyes under half-

closed lids accentuating his truculence and ungodly bestiality.

Suddenly the book Gebhard had opened now closed with a snap. Clematis started violently, nearly upsetting her nerves. She saw him advancing toward her, slowly, felinely, a steely glitter in his eyes, a serpent smile on his lips. Instinctively she retreated, checking the cry that rose to her lips.

"Would you know Douglas Marling's secret?" he demanded hoarsely.

"No! I don't want to *know!*" she said defiantly. "I defy you to tell *even* me the secret that is sacred to him!" she added, almost whispering the words, her face white and twitching.

"By the devil, you shall *know!*" he ground out brutally, gripping her shoulders till she felt the pain. "*It is your right to know for you are ———*" Then, suddenly releasing her, he said threateningly: "*Auf wiedersehen! Auf wiedersehen!*" and was gone.

Involuntarily, she wound her arms up about her head and buried her face in them. She felt alone, utterly alone; felt the nervousness of her childhood creeping over her and she wondered if she were again going to be a victim of amnesia.

Then, suddenly conscious of a presence in the room, she remembered she had a visitor. She had forgotten all about Sylvia Sterling. With a sudden start, she aroused herself and, with supreme effort, recovered a certain amount of calm. She glanced quickly toward Sylvia, who stood bending above the vase of hyacinths, drinking in their delicious fragrance. Sylvia Sterling had told Jack Holland that she meant to be a

friend to Clematis and she had come now to keep her word.

"These are beautiful," she said lightly, still bending above the hyacinths.

When Gebhard approached and began speaking with Clematis, she had tactfully and purposely excluded herself. Now she smiled as she looked up from the flowers. "I suppose Mr. Anthony sent these to you."

"Mr. Anthony never sends me flowers."

"You can't make me believe that," laughed Sylvia banteringly. With a fight for self-control, Clematis approached and stood by her friend.

"Why? Have you rejected him?"

Clematis laughed nervously.

"Really, Sylvia, what else could I do?"

"Marry him, of course."

"Marry him? I couldn't do that. I simply *couldn't*. Won't you sit down, Sylvia, and let us talk for a while?"

"Charmed," assented Sylvia, and the two sat down on a sofa together.

"Speaking of Carl Anthony," continued Miss Sterling, "I suppose he's a good fellow in a way. He's not really bad. A lot of people think he's a superb catch. My dear, he is rich, you know, very rich and, if you married him, think what he would do for you!"

"It is useless, utterly useless, Sylvia, for you to try to influence me to become Carl Anthony's wife."

"I am not trying to persuade you into marrying him."

"Then if you are not, please don't let's discuss him."

"Oh, dear, I *do* want you to be happy," said Sylvia pleadingly.

"I don't look so very miserable, do I?"

"You might be happier."

"Yes, I might be happier," returned Clematis wistfully.

For a moment Sylvia gazed at her friend. She knew Clematis was being shamefully talked about, and she ought to know the things that were being said and, too, she ought to know the sort of man Marling was. It pained her, to have to enlighten Clematis, but it must be done. She *must* be told.

"Dear," she began, taking her hand in hers, "I want to be *your* friend and I don't want to hurt you: I wouldn't hurt you for all the world! But can't you see, don't you *know* you ought *not* to live here. People are talking *fearfully*, saying *dreadful things*! It's all because of Douglas Marling. You should leave his house *at once*!"

"Hush. *You shall not say these things to me!*" Clematis shot back fiercely. "I won't listen to you! Must I repudiate him because a lot of stupid people don't and can't understand and are against him?"

"Must a woman forget what she owes to herself?" demanded Sylvia emphatically.

Clematis rose from her seat and paced the floor in nervous agitation. Did Sylvia Sterling know? Did all the world know Marling's secret and she did not?

"I won't listen to you, Sylvia. *I won't!* Douglas Marling has been father, mother, friend, *all* to me! O God! help me to remember! *Help me to remember!*"

It was the cry of a lacerated heart, a sob from an almost broken soul. Sylvia pitied her from the depths of her being, yet she must do her duty if she would be her friend. Only a moment ago, Horace Gebhard had spoken

and said she must know, that it was *her* right to know. Sylvia gazed on the bowed figure pityingly.

"God help you to remember the most sacred thing,—a woman's duty to herself!" she declared with gentle firmness.

"Douglas Marling is *no friend*, never has been friend to *you*! Think what *he* is! You are dropped, cut dead by the members of your set because of *him*! At the very last moment, didn't they all fail to come to the Irving dinner *because* of you? Only yesterday Mrs. Judge Farnham said she would never again ask you to her house because of him! She thinks ——"

Clematis turned and faced Sylvia proudly, defiantly, then spoke emphatically, almost fiercely:

"I don't care what that woman thinks! It is what *I think*, what *Douglas Marling* thinks and not the verdict of the world!"

"Oh, Clematis, why do you cling to this man?" exclaimed Sylvia imploringly.

"Be—because I—I—love him!" Clematis faltered slowly, vibrantly. Sylvia stared at her in blank amazement. How could Clematis love Douglas Marling? Even respect him?

"You love him?" she queried in astonishment?

"I love him," came back in the same low tones. "He is my life, my very soul!"

"My God! Clematis," exclaimed Sylvia with sudden fierceness, "have you forgotten about Douglas Marling, what he has done?"

"What has he done? Tell me what he has done so wicked?"

"Is it possible that you don't know that he is a *married*

man? That his wife, whom he wedded and deserted, is still living? Didn't you know *that?* Hasn't he ——?"

"Married? Douglas Marling a married man?" questioned Clematis hoarsely.

"Yes. Didn't *you* know?"

"*Stop! You lie!*"

The words came imperiously. Was this *his* secret? Was it *true?* It must be true for he had said the secret was the one sacred thing of his life. No, she *could* not, would not believe it until she heard it from his lips.

"*You lie!*" she repeated fiercely.

"It is the truth," said Sylvia solemnly. I swear it is the truth!"

"It is a wicked, *wicked* lie! If it were true, I should have known! "Wh—who told you? Ho—How *do you know?*" she stammered.

"*Everybody* knows! Why, it's been in the *newspapers!* Weeks ago it came out in *The Evening Chronicle!*"

Clematis held her breath. She was simply stunned at what she heard.

"*In the paper?*" she repeated faintly.

"Yes, didn't you see it?"

"No, I—I didn't see it," she answered dully. Then, after a moment, she asked quiveringly: "D—did *her* name appear in the paper?"

"No. Somehow it was suppressed. I suppose it was left out on purpose!"

"Do *y-you know* her?" was questioned feverishly.

"No, I don't know her personally, but she—she is the woman with the beautiful gold in her hair. She has a—*a little boy.*"

"What is—is *her* name?"

"*Pappeia Ardeth!*" said Sylvia, her heart throbbing with keenest agony. She felt for Clematis.

"You say she has a—a little boy? And is he like his—his father?"

"They say he is a handsome child!"

The room was very still now, still as death. Brightly the sun shone, glinting here and there with gold and tinting the white statue with beautiful rose gleams. So *this* was *his* secret!

Shambling, almost staggering, she walked to a great chair and dropped into its extended arms. For a time she lay there limp and still. Sylvia waited in silence, painfully distressed, then stole out softly.

CHAPTER VI.

ANTHONY paced the floor of his bed-room, then came back to the woman, and caught hold of her.

"You are not my wife!" he said harshly. Clarisse broke from him and faced him defiantly.

"I am *your* wife!" she flashed bravely. "We were married and you *know* it!"

"You little fool!" he laughed mockingly, gripping her wrists and forcing her to her knees till she grovelled at his feet. "It was no *marriage*, no *legal* thing! It was *fake* all the way through! Stop that blithering," he commanded roughly. "It's no time for dew-drops. Cheer up! You are going to sing at 'The Morning-glory.' You've a peach of a voice and Houlman and I wanted you to sing at our famous cabaret. That's what I trapped you for. We knew we couldn't get hold of you any other way, so there you are! Cheer up, I say. It's New Year!" He let go the woman's wrists. She had fallen prone upon the floor in front of him. She had fainted. The man gazed down at her with fixed, hard features.

He had known Clarisse Sanderson for years. She was the daughter of wealthy and aristocratic parents and she had been brought up in a refined way; in fact, she knew nothing but refinement.

The young and unsuspecting should know about the bogging swamps and their delusive mirages; about the

creeping worm hidden in the sweet, green grass and the stinging serpent lodging in the cool shadow of the underbrush!

With folded arms and callous eyes he stood there gazing down upon the unconscious woman, making no attempt to lift or even revive her. A tentative smile lingered about his mouth as he thought of his next victim, Clematis! Even if she were Douglas Marling's wife, he meant to win, decoy her as he had done the attractive and bewitching Clarisse. He had hoped to make Clematis his wife, to have won her love, but since this hope was inevitably shattered, he was determined to decoy and make her his one way or another.

Carl Anthony laughed harshly. The very thought tingled his blood. Suddenly the woman at his feet moaned. He started slightly, then uncorking a small bottle, he bent down and held it to her lips and once more she lapsed into unconsciousness. As he bent above her, still holding the phial to her parted lips, the man caught a whiff of the liquid and the smell of it was sweet, pungent, deadening. It was *chloroform*! For a space he knelt beside her and listened to her even breathing and, seeing that she was safe, returned the phial to his inner pocket, then lifted the graceful form from the floor and placed it upon the bed.

She wore a gown of sweet lavender that folded and rippled about her like violet tinted clouds. How beautiful and still she was as she lay sleeping! She seemed some spirit from Heaven rather than a woman. Anthony studied her delicate features, then suddenly drew a sheet over her.

Conden, Houlman's manager at "The Morning-glory,"

was coming for her. Houlman was astute and he knew that the lovely Clarisse Sanderson and her charming colorature voice would bewitch and prove an enormous drawing-card.

Why did not Condén come? Anthony was impatient. With a quick movement, he turned and glanced at the time-piece. It was ten o'clock. He wished the man would come and take her away. It was time for him now. He should have been here.

Anthony passed quickly out of his sleeping apartment into the sitting room. The minutes seemed interminable. He watched the clock till the hand reached five minutes past — then the electric bell sounded. He opened the door, and faced two men. They were Condén and Casey. Condén had brought the man with him in case the woman proved refractory. These two men looked on Anthony and Joseph Houlman as superior beings and exhibited toward them a sort of reverential respect.

"Hello, Mr. Anthony," greeted Casey. "Is she ready?"

"Yes. But what in the devil delayed you?"

"Couldn't get away sooner," said Condén. "Is she likely to give us trouble?"

"No, not in the least. I think you will find her as docile as a lamb."

The two men followed Anthony into his sleeping apartment. Softly he drew back the coverlet and there she lay, beautiful as some purple orchid. The three men stood by and gazed fixedly upon her.

"Hum, she's beautiful!" exclaimed Casey. "Like a flower."

"Shut up!" said Condén. "You'll wake the sleeping lady."

"She doesn't hear us," re-iterated Anthony.

"Better give her another send off," suggested Casey.

"All right, boss, give her a 'poppy'," urged Conden.

"'Twon't hurt her. Maybe she'll sleep a little longer than she's used to, that's all?"

Anthony once more drew forth the small bottle and held it to the woman's lips and let her breathe of the pungent anaesthetic. The two men then wrapped the unconscious form in a heavy blanket, lifted their burden, and prepared to depart. When they reached the door, Conden paused.

"The boss will be here soon," he said.

"When?" asked Anthony.

"Don't know," was the answer.

Anthony watched them depart. There was no qualm of conscience, no pitying regret. His features were hard and expressionless as a Titan god. He heard the noise of shuffling feet on the back stairs, then die away in the distance.

Another woman's life caught in the web.

Anthony looked about him and saw that the fair Clarisse was not there, and he smiled a relieved smile.

After a little he was cold, quite cold and passed into his sitting-room. It was warm there. He drew aside the curtains to let in the sun-gleams, then opened the grand piano, sat down and dashed off a valse brilliant. Then, with sudden quickness, he leaped up from the instrument, lit a cigar and blew whiffs of purple vapor. After pacing several turns up and down the room, he planted himself before the center table, prepared a whiskey-soda and drank it down hurriedly, feeling it burn his throat and tingle his blood. He needed something

to stir and buoy him. Surely there was nothing to disturb him! He prepared another whiskey-soda and carried it off with a single gulp, then dropped into a chair and picked up the morning papers. Rapidly he let his eyes travel along the printed columns and he caught sight of the name, Douglas Marling, glaring at him in flaring headlines. Marling had made a hit with the press; they believed he was sincere, that he was fighting along the right lines and now they were lionizing him.

Anthony uttered a curse and, crushing the paper into a crinkled mass, flung it upon the floor. Marling had hurt the Commercial League. There was only *one* way to shut them up and that was to raid "The Morning-glory." There was a quiver of the electric bell. Anthony opened the door and Joseph Houlman entered.

"Hello, Anthony! How are you?"

"Hello, friend! I'm all right, come in. And you?"

"Oh, pretty well. It's warm here," said Houlman, removing his hat and gloves and divesting himself of his great Russian coat.

"This room is always warm," assented Anthony. "Have a whiskey-soda?"

"Ah, that sounds good. Indeed I will," smiled Houlman. The two men drew chairs on either side of the table and faced each other.

"Well, we're going to have one of the biggest nights we've ever had," said Houlman exultantly, "in fact, the biggest on record! I tell you, man," he went on with enthusiasm, "It's going to be a great haul and a pocket-filling!" and the man of the League chuckled as he sketched the picture. "Oh, for the song of a coin, the

song of a coin!" he hummed pleasantly. Anthony sipped his beverage, then set down his glass.

"Ah, to be sure, it is New Year's Eve," he said.

"Yes, New Year's Eve," echoed Houlman, and his smile broadened and his eyes squinted perceptibly. It made him feel good, supremely happy to know that with all of Marling's drastic measures against him; with all of his watchfulness and calculated precaution, he still outwitted the Marling men, the very district attorney himself.

"We've arranged to ——"

"To keep open all night?" queried Anthony under his breath.

"Yes."

"Did you fix it up?"

The man of the cabarets again chuckled softly.

"Not exactly. Conden and Kent put it through for me. You know they ——"

"Ah, yes, I know! So they've fixed it up all right?"

Joseph Houlman laughed and his eyes glowed with confidence and keen satisfaction:

"Certain," he answered with a note of triumph in his voice. "We'll have things humming tonight!"

"And I am going to win Clematis from Marling," declared Anthony vehemently. "Marling's got us whipped, but we will beat him *there!*"

"And we will beat him to-night!" cut in Houlman.

Anthony studied his empty glass.

"Everything is going Marling's way," he said. "The press have shot over to him and——"

"And Grey Sanborn and the rest of his infernal gang," shot back Houlman fiercely.

"Grey Seaborn?" exclaimed Anthony. "The deuce, he has!"

"Yes. He came to me early this morning and told me that he and his men were against me and had gone over to Marling. Devils have no gratitude!"

Anthony made no reply. In silence he read Tekel in large capital letters. "Well, if that is the case," he said slowly and with bitter emphasis, "there's no chance for us. My God! man, Marling's got us in the spotlight, and we had better get out while we can!"

"Not yet," grunted Houlman, an ugly scowl between his eye-brows. "Not yet! The sea is ever restless and the tide may still turn our way! We can't pull out now!"

"Why not? Delays are *dangerous*! What *are* you waiting for?"

A savage gleam shot from the squinting eyes of the pirate chief and his jaws opened like those of a bull-dog, showing his big yellow teeth.

"Revenge!" he said fiercely, "*revenge!*"

"Revenge?" echoed Anthony, and he laughed gratingly. "*What a joke!* You're a fool, Houlman, an idiotic fool. Marling's got us down under-foot crushing out our very existence, yet you yell out *Revenge!*"

"Why, man, are *you* blind? Can't you see Marling's on the inside?"

Joseph Houlman half rose in his chair.

"On the inside?" he gasped.

"Yes."

"How'd he get there?"

"Easy enough."

"But how'd he get *there?*" he thundered angrily. "Answer me!"

For a second Anthony remained silent, fingering the stem of his glass and watching the play of color within.

"Spies!" he shot out finally.

"Spies?" cried the other, aghast. "Who's spying?"

Anthony waited another moment, debating.

"Well," he said, "If you want to know,—the spies are —*Robson and Pappieia Ardeth!*"

The chief of the pirates stood up, his face bloated, his eyes ablaze.

"It's a lie!" he exclaimed furiously, "an infernal lie! I don't believe it. Robson and Pina would never *betray* me! They are my right hand pair and would never turn against me."

"*Put not your faith in woman!*" cynically reminded Anthony.

"But she would never betray me," staunchly insisted Houlman. "Pina would never do *that!*"

"You'll see!" retorted Anthony. "Time will prove it! When the district attorney gets hold of us and we're under fire of prosecution, you'll find out that Pina and Robson have turned state's evidence and will be the principal witnesses against us."

"But the district attorney hasn't got us yet!" chuckled the man of the League, dropping back into his chair with marked relief, a sudden glow of triumph in his eyes. "Not yet!"

"No, there's only one way to shut us up," said Anthony, meditatively and with bitter emphasis, "and that ——"

"How?" questioned Houlman anxiously, fearfully, leaning forward intently.

"Raid 'the Morning-glory' in East 64th Street!"

Joseph Houlman started violently as if he had been shot. He had thought of that, but never dared breathe it even to Anthony or Pina. But suppose Marling did? Suppose he should raid *to-night*? At the thought, Houlman trembled in acute alarm, his eyes squinting horribly.

"Raid 'The Morning-glory'?" he questioned hoarsely, after a pause, supporting himself against the cushions. "What makes you think that, Anthony? Do you believe, really think he will?" he almost whispered, gripping hard the arms of his chair.

"I don't know," responded Anthony nervously. "I don't know."

Joseph Houlman leaped to his feet and drew on his great Russian coat.

"Marling will never raid 64th Street," he said between his teeth. "No, he'll never do *that*! Marling is not a *dare-devil*!"

CHAPTER VII.

CLEMATIS was shocked. She had had suspicion, but she never thought it was this; that Marling was a married man; that his wife was Pappeia Ardeth, the beautiful woman with the glint of gold in her hair, and that there was a little boy! She had seen them both, mother and child, but only to glance at them casually. Now she knew why she was censured for living in Marling's house. He would, of course, bring his wife and little boy to live there and she must go at once. But when and where? Her head ached dully.

With eyes closed and seemingly unconscious, she lay motionless in her chair, her face buried in its cushioned back. She did not hear the door open and close; did not hear someone enter, cross the room and stand very near to her.

Horace Gebhard had returned. For a space he stood there gazing down at her, noting how still she was. In his eyes gleamed savage elation and a thin rakish smile hovered about his sensual, brutal mouth.

"Ah, my dear Clematis, so you are disillusioned! Your god has tumbled and shattered and you are distressed, greatly distressed," he chuckled, bending down over her. She started violently. She had not the slightest idea he was anywhere near. With the swiftness of a fawn, she leaped from her chair and faced him.

"You!" she cried. Gebhard watched her eagerly, ex-

ultantly, his countenance depicting triumph, the smile still hovering on his lips.

"So, my dear young woman, you know Marling's secret?" he said.

"It seems to have affected your very delicate nervous system. Quite a shock to you, I suppose. You never once dreamed, even suspicioned, the noble Galahad of wrong-doing, did you? In my eyes he never sat among the gods!"

"No, no, it is *not* true! *I know it is not true!*" she exclaimed, still facing him. "*You know it is not true.*"

"It is true," he hissed. Then he continued in hard tones, speaking rapidly: "I am glad you know his secret. You should have known years ago. It was your right to know. For years he has played the devil, acted the traitor toward you and ——"

For a moment she glared at him dumbly.

"Toward me? What do you mean, Mr. Gebhard?" she murmured. "I—I—won't listen to you! You shall not say one word against him!" she declared emphatically, placing her hands over her ears and turning away from him. He was too quick for her, however. He caught her wrists and held her fast before him.

"No, you shall not go. You shall listen to me," he breathed tensely. "Douglas Marling married a mere child and never acknowledged her, hid his secret which left her open to shameful condemnation. At the time of her so-called marriage to him, she was ill, a victim of amnesia and, even after she recovered, she never once remembered. The girl is now a woman and she is ——"

"Is—is—Pappeia Ardeth!" whispered Clematis falteringly. Gebhard let go her wrists and laughed im-

moderately. He was greatly amused. Marling married to Pappeia! What a joke!

"Ah, my dear Clematis," he said suavely, "you have been deceived, grossly deceived. Miss Sterling was mistaken. Doubtless she was misinformed. Though they have a boy, and he is very like his father, Pappeia Ardeth is not married to Marling. She is not his wife. He is in love, madly in love with another woman, has been for years."

Gebhard stopped to weigh the effect of his words.

Clematis stood white and still, with head bent and averted face. She longed to get out of the reach of this man, but there was no other way but to stay and listen. After a moment, he resumed pitilessly:

"Douglas Marling never proclaimed the marriage; never even reminded her of the incident because it was *fake all the way through!* Don't shudder. Very probably he bought his girl-wife and paid for her. Well, who knows? It's not impossible. It is *most* likely! At any rate, he found her a miserable, wretched little waif in the hands of a brute and a devil. The fiend was no other than *her father*, Arthur Vallerie. He is still living, and makes his home in Wilburton with one Herman Vlotsky, a shoemaker. The poor fellow is now a helpless paralytic, his lower limbs being paralyzed. He greatly deplotes his brutality toward his daughter, and day by day yearns, prays for just one glimpse of her. She should go to him. It is her duty. Possibly she doesn't know, doesn't even remember, for when Marling found her she was almost a mental as well as a physical wreck. Now she is a well woman, mentally and physically. Doubtless many times she has wondered how she came into Marling's

life, but he has never told her, for the reason, as I said a moment ago, it was a fake marriage, fake all the way through, and—Clematis,” he said, with a sort of elated viciousness, “there is no use beating about the bush. You should know the truth. *You—are—the woman!*”

A low startled cry broke from her, verging on hysteria. She was shocked and, staggering forward, reached out for a chair and held to it for support. A great sob rose in her throat, but she checked it and essayed to speak.

“No, no, it isn’t true. It *can’t* be true! It is—is *impossible!* I—I—” she whispered very faintly, then ended abruptly, for a light broke in upon her and she realized suddenly that what this man told her was at least part truth.

Now since Gebhard reminded her, she recalled the incident of the ceremony; again she wore a white dress and carried white peonies and lilies-of-the-valley; again she entered a room beautiful and delicious with flowers and stood by Marling’s side before a dark-haired man who read something from a book and spoke to them, but other than this she remembered nothing.

Instantly she recalled the story Marling had recounted to her about the man who married a very young girl and never acknowledged her and his reason for silence. It *was her own story!* She had said, that if she were the girl, she would hate the man. Did she hate Marling? Now that she knew, would she hate him? For one sweet instant a great throb of joy electrified her whole being, then she smothered it for, by reason of conditions, she felt it was not a legal marriage. She would loathe him utterly if she knew one thing were actually true, *that he had bought and*

paid for her! She knew Marling, at least felt him to be a man of spotless record; honor shone in his eyes.

"I—I won't believe anything," she faltered miserably.

"It is true, nevertheless," rudely interpolated Gebhard. "That is why you have been so talked about. For years I have known and only lately it began to leak out. Weeks ago an ugly thing appeared in the evening paper. Didn't you see it?"

"No, I—I—didn't see it," she stammered feebly. She remembered that Sylvia Sterling had told her about the newspaper incident, so it must be true.

"I will tell you why you did not see it," he said gloatingly, bending toward her. Involuntarily she retreated. "Marling burned the paper!"

Clematis shivered, her face whitened, and she clutched at the emptiness about her.

"Burned it?" she breathed hoarsely.

"Yes, burned it. He did it because, he said, he didn't want you to see it, that he wanted you to learn the truth from him. He has not told you, very likely never intends to tell you. At all events, it is leaking out, getting into the papers and ——"

"Who told it? *You!*" she cried fiercely. "*You!*"

"And I shall tell again," he answered calmly. "He has kept his secret well, but it shall find him out. The mask shall be lifted and Douglas Marling shall be known as he is — liar, impostor."

A low agonized cry passed her lips and she seemed on the verge of collapse. The man was brutal, had spared her nothing.

"Ah, that hurts, doesn't it? Marling has posed as a

benevolent bachelor and the world has known only Jekyll. Now it shall know Hyde! You believe ——”

“I believe nothing till I hear it from *his* lips.”

“You shall hear it from *his* lips! Before God, he shall not, dare not, deny!”

Clematis looked straight into the man’s eyes.

“Before God, he shall not become the victim of your dastardly plotting!” she flashed scathingly. “You shall not ruin his life and bring him to disgrace! Already he has suffered because of your wicked treachery. At first I did not understand, but now, now I *know*! You have lied about him. Judas betrayed Christ into the hands of his enemies for thirty pieces of silver; likewise you will betray your best friend into the hands of those who hate him! Who will pay you to do this thing. Joseph Houlman and his criminals?”

“I shall be paid not to betray but to *keep* his secret!”

“Who will dare to offer you money, for silence?”

The man’s eyes scintillated exultantly. He debated a moment, then answered:

“You! And at this very hour!”

For the moment Clematis was overwhelmed.

“What do you mean?” she demanded finally, with a tremendous effort at composure. “I offer *you* money? Contemptible coward! You are mistaken, Horace Gebhard. You have encountered the wrong person! I am not a fool to be bullied and frightened by you.”

“See here, I am out for money. I’ve *got* to have it. If you’ll give it to me, I’ll shut my mouth about it, but if you don’t, I’ll—well, I’ll go to the papers. They are eager for such stuff. I’ll tell what sort of a devil Marling is; that he found you a miserable little waif, ill and your

mind almost gone; that he bought and paid for you, forced you into a fake marriage, which he kept secret and, if he chose, ——”

“Stop!” cried Clematis in a wail of agony and she bowed her head and sobbed. She knew if the papers got hold of a story like that, a story pregnant with such gross sensation, they would seize, gloat over it. Anything for capital! It were better, far better to buy his silence. But had Marling bought and paid for her. Was he guilty of anything so wicked, so preposterous? Had she been bought and sold? Sold by whom? Her father? Oh, God, no, *no*.

“I—I—will!” she breathed faintly. “You will—keep his secret?”

“Yes. I will keep his secret.”

“Man, traitor! name your price!”

“*Ten thousand dollars!* That or none,” replied the man brazenly. Clematis stared in profound amazement.

“Ten thousand dollars!” she murmured below her breath. That was a big sum to pay, to demand from Marling. Would he give it to her without question? Would he suspect? Even if he did suspect, it were better to buy Gebhard’s silence, for it was a terrible, terrible story he had unfolded to her and it would never, never do to let such a story get to the newspapers! For ten thousand he would keep the secret of the man she loved. She would obtain the money and turn it over to Gebhard. She would do it not for herself, but for Douglas Marling!

“You hesitate. You are afraid,” sneered Gebhard threateningly, scrutinizing her.

“Afraid? No, I am not afraid,” she answered with almost a sob in her throat.

"You will get me the money?" he questioned eagerly, not taking his eyes from her face.

"Yes."

"You will not tell Marling why and for whom you want it?"

"No."

"You swear?"

"I have promised. That is sufficient," she replied, bravely trying to keep back the sobs that nearly choked her.

"When will you get it?"

"When do you want it?"

"To-night, to-day, now!"

Clematis looked up for a moment, then turned away.

"Perhaps—to-night," she faltered vaguely and very low.

"Thank you, dear Clematis. It's good of you," he said effusively.

"Don't thank me," she breathed scornfully. "I am not doing it as a favor to you. I am doing it for *him*, to save him from you and your vile treachery!"

At this moment, Alicia, who had just returned from a fitting at Madame Dunne's, swept into the room. She perceived at a glance that her husband had told his story, detected the gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Oh, you should see my gown! It is a dream!" she exclaimed, slowly drawing off her gloves. Noiselessly she glided over to him. "Have you got the money?" she asked almost inaudibly. Gebhard smiled elatedly.

"No," he answered, "but she is going to give it to me to-night."

"She is really going to give it to you?" his wife questioned equivocally, smiling sweetly at him.

"Yes, dear."

"Isn't it a beautiful house?"

"Yes, darling."

"Why doesn't daddy let us live here?"

"He doesn't want us."

"Why doesn't he want us?"

"Child, he doesn't care about you and me," his mother replied bitterly.

"They are going to give a party here, aren't they?" pursued the child after a moment.

"I—I—believe so," was the vague response.

"Are we coming?"

"We haven't been asked."

"Shall we be asked?" Jean questioned eagerly.

"No. We are not wanted," the woman jerked out harshly. The boy's lips puckered slightly, but he said nothing. Pappeia still waited; she shifted her eyes toward Clematis and their glances met but only for a moment, then Pappeia turned incontinently to Garland.

"You won't forget to give the note to him?"

"No, madam," was the respectful answer.

"Thank you," she said. "I will come back to-night, *ten o'clock* to-night!" she breathed emphatically.

"Come, Jean, we must be going," she added, catching him by the hand and gently pushing him in front of her. Then, as she reached the door, she turned and looked back at Clematis. Again their glances met.

"Ten o'clock to-night," she repeated as their eyes encountered, then she was gone. When Garland closed the door, Clematis breathed a sigh of relief. Yet ten o'clock to-night still sounded in her ears. It was strange the woman should look at her twice and say for the second

time, "Ten o'clock to-night." Was Pappeia coming to see her? *Why* was she coming? She did not know the woman, had only seen her casually; besides she had nothing to say to her. Clematis was necessarily disturbed. For the life of her, she did not understand.

"Are you ill, Miss?" inquired Garland solicitously. Clematis did not know that for moments the old servant had been watching her.

"No, no, I—I—am quite well, thank you," she faltered slightly. Then, with supreme effort, she turned hastily and entered the library.

It was somewhat a surprise and keen disappointment when she did not find Marling but instead discovered Carl Anthony. She did not advance to meet him but stood beside the library table.

"How do you do?" he greeted, coming toward her and extending his hand.

"Good-morning," she answered, not seeing his proffered hand. She did not ask him to sit down.

"Did you know I called last evening? Your man said you were out."

"Yes. Garland told me on my return. Sorry you troubled to wait."

"Oh, I didn't mind that," he said effusively. "A man doesn't mind waiting for, well,—for the woman he loves. Ah, Clematis," he added fervently, "Surely you must see, must know that I love you."

"Mr. Anthony," she interrupted almost harshly. "If you have any message for Mr. Marling, I shall listen, but if you continue in this strain, I shall have to ask you to excuse me."

Anthony flushed. Her continued rebuff angered him

and now he controlled his feelings with an effort. After a moment, he approached and, bending over her, breathed hoarsely.

"Ah, if you knew how I loved you; how I worshipped you! God! I would barter my soul to the devil to *win* you!"

Clematis recoiled instantly and her eyes flashed angrily.

"If you would sell your soul to the devil to win me," she flashed scornfully, "I forbear to inflict the dreadful punishment. I desire you and Satan find some other means of bargaining."

"Heartless woman!" he exclaimed hotly. "You bend to the authority of another instead of following the dictates of your own heart! You ruthlessly cast aside the most priceless thing I have to offer! I would make you my wife, take you in my arms and love you, protect you, but you dare to cling to a devil and a deceiver! Marling cares not for a woman's life! He wedded in secrecy and never acknowledged his wife. He doesn't intend to acknowledge her. It was a fake marriage, fake all the way through! The girl whom he inveigled into this fake marriage, is now a woman. Yet you cling to the man who has done this thing! *You are the woman!*"

For a moment, Clematis hid her face in her arms. She could not endure the keen probing of his words. Even *he* knew! It seemed everybody knew except herself.

"Go!" she cried harshly.

A low laugh came from Anthony.

"God knows I would save you from him," he added in desperation. Clematis lifted her head and looked at him.

"No matter what you say about Douglas Marling, I will not believe you. No matter what he has done, I will

cling to him!" she flashed in proud defiance. Anthony's eyes bulged and there were contorted lines about his mouth.

"Remember," he gnashed warningly and unsparingly, "when Douglas Marling is tired of you, he will cast you aside like a dilapidated thing."

"Go! Go!" she cried in shrill, agonized tones. The man waited, the gleam of hatred in his eyes. He had lost but only for the moment. He would yet gain her from Marling. If necessary, possess her by main force. With a quick movement, he seized her in his arms and held her roughly against him. Clematis uttered a shrill cry and struggled fiercely to liberate herself. But it was useless, for he held her close, crushing her to him.

"I have you now! *Now!* You shall not get away from me this time! You are mine, all *mine* and I love you!" he breathed hoarsely, and he bent down and would have kissed her but at that moment the door opened and Douglas Marling stood on the threshold intently regarding them.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO-NIGHT the outer world was dark, starless, cheerless, and there was every indication of a frightful blizzard but on the inside of the "Morning-glory," Houlman's principal cabaret, which was luxurious even to detail, all was aglow; lights burned and colors flamed, lending a touch of gay festiveness to the ensemble. It was to be a gala night, for it was New Year. Yet the gay festiveness was a sham. Oh, the remorseless waste of human lives! the heartless prodigality of beautiful youth.

Johan, wearing his blond wig and suit of dark blue with gilt buttons, was at his post as door-keeper, admitting the men and women as they filed in; some speaking, others nodding kindly to him as they passed swiftly and entered the café, agleam with lights and fragrant with flowers. The boy meant to leave this place, meant this to be his last night. He had told Marling of his intention to abandon his job, to quit 64th Street, whereupon, Marling promised to make him office-boy and give him double pay. Johan was delighted and, as he went back to the old routine for one more night, just one more, his heart throbbed with a new happiness. He beheld wonderful gleams of a new life open before him. He was sick of the doings of the under-world, facing temptations and shattering his ideals. He yearned for the better things, the clean wholesome atmosphere of the open.

Ah, but there was Vance Beverly, the devil who had wrecked his sister Veta's life. Johan meant to keep on the watch for that man. Even if he were in Marling's employ he would keep on the lookout.

Now, as he stood there by the door, he scrutinized every face, looking for Marling and Beverly, but neither had put in an appearance. Men and women strolled into the café, seated themselves at the many tables, ate, drank and were merry, while an orchestra rendered in spirited manner the latest song success from the newest comic operas.

Suddenly there was a hush, a dead stillness. A charming little brunette, representing a morning-glory, costumed in a purple gown and wearing the morning blossoms in her hair and on her breast, her bare arms and shoulders white and agleam, stood upon the gaily decorated platform amid tango tints and clusters of electric lights, smiling radiantly. For a moment she waited while the orchestra played a rippling prelude, then she sang bewitchingly, her voice trilling exquisitely every note and cadence, a simple little lyric entitled: Morning-glories.

Tremendous acclamation following the singing of the verses; men clinked glasses with the sparkle of strong drink in them and there ensued a general furore, a sort of happy pandemonium.

From across the tables, men and women began to toss at each other morning-glories which the singer laughingly and with a graceful flourish had thrown among the assembled guests. From an angle, a group of men viewed the spectacle with evident enjoyment. Houlman's eyes squinted fearfully. Conden's pitted and wicked countenance gleamed with exquisite exultation while Casey, Anthony and Kent, who occupied a side table, scanned the ensemble critically and with feigned nonchalance.

"A fine night!" observed Conden with a grin to Anthony.

"Yes, a deuced fine night!" retorted the other shortly.

"We've a peach of a programme," said Kent with enthusiasm.

"Ah, indeed?" queried a man with a derisive smile. The interrogation though prosaic excited interest. The man who had put the question was tall and well built, with clear-cut and regular features, wore glasses, a dark heavy moustache, was entirely in black and spoke with a decided accent. There was something singularly distinguished, peculiarly magnetic about him that attracted attention and accorded him second notice. In the moment of silence when he had put the question, everyone turned to stare but no one seemed to know him. Evidently he was a stranger. Houlman had seen him when he entered and had kept his gaze fixed on him. Nothing escaped the keen probing eyes of the man of the "League." Now he came forward and at once approached his new patron.

"Glad to see you. Come to try your luck?" he asked.

There was scarcely need for preliminaries.

"I've come to play the game," answered the man in black.

"Ah," exclaimed Houlman suavely, "we've got every sort, every game of chance. Ever been to Christian before?" queried the man of the "League" after a moment.

"Live here," was the answer. "Know it like a book."

Joseph Houlman started slightly and gave the man closer inspection.

"What's your name, friend?" he questioned, still scrutinizing him.

"Wenson Rhinecuff."

"Rhinecuff? Any kin to old James Rhinecuff of the middle west?"

"No kin," was the laconic reply.

"Know him?"

"No, haven't the honor of his acquaintance," returned the man in black. "And you," he added, keeping his eyes fixed on the man of the cabarets, "are Joseph Houlman, the great cabaret and League man and political boss? I've heard a great deal about you and have always wanted to get a shot at you!"

Joseph Houlman laughed tentatively.

"I hope you will take a shot at the game," he said.

"I mean to. That's what I came for," responded Rhinecuff with a punctilious smile, giving his shoulders a perceptible shrug. "I mean to go up directly after the programme is over. You've a fine stall, in fact, the finest I've seen."

"Ah, so we have, so we have," said Houlman smiling blandly. Then, with a wave of the hand, he left his new acquaintance and made straight for Conden. "See that man over there in black against the wall?" he asked.

"The one at the fifth table from here?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"Well, he's Wenson Rhinecuff. He knows the game. Anybody can see that! He's likely to make us a damn fine patron and do us a turn. Show him a favor!"

"I'll do it, boss! I'll touch the wheel for Mr. Rhinecuff," acquiesced Conden with a grin.

"Well, get to work there," ordered the man of the League imperiously. "Start the wheel! Don't wait till the programme's over. It's time. Get to business!"

"All right, boss," replied the other meekly and, in another moment, Conden scurried off to reign over his coign, the most alluring and most notorious gambling stall in Christian.

All about the apartments were tables and velveted cushioned chairs: great bevelled mirrors reflected myriad electric lights, while along the polished surface of white marble floors stretched wide ribbons of heavy carpeting of finest texture and richest red. Leading from this room or foyer was a richly furnished apartment where players, greatly wearied and keyed to high tension, could seek rest and refreshment in order to continue at the game till the gray light of morning. Now came the sound of applause from below but the players did not heed, too intent in their own game.

From his seat against the wall, Wenson Rhinecuff followed the next number on the programme. A juggler was performing a wonder of wonders, tossing plates and saucers, of thinnest china, till they rolled and curved along easily in mid-air; spinning out liquid flame in most fantastic shapes and ribbons and bringing from nowhere beautiful birds and butterflies which skimmed and flashed and fluttered about in rhythmical and serpentine dance.

Following the juggler, appeared a graceful, beautiful young woman, the glint of gold in her wonderful brown eyes. As she came forward, head drooping slightly, cheeks flushed, eyes dimmed by the mist of tears, her gown curling and falling about her in soft lavender ripples, a murmur of admiration swept the room. She was none other than the lovely Clarisse Sanderson whom Anthony had decoyed and entrapped and who now poured out her liquid voice in exquisite cadence, singing, "O

Thou Lovely Night-time." As he gazed upon her, Anthony felt no qualm, no pricking of conscience but glared at her with a debonair smile. When the last note died on her lips, she received an ovation and was deluged with flowers, forcing her to respond again and again.

She had scarcely retired when a sextette of American "beauties," costumed in the same brilliant hue and carrying great arm-showers of the long-stemmed roses, danced out and sung upon the stage. The "beauties" caught the audience and were given a rousing encore.

After the sextette came a youthful violinist with the light of dreams in his eyes, dreams of the great musician. Ah, what exquisite temperament was his! He played with his soul, for he was a born artist, his bow caressing the strings, singing out beauty of tone, pathos and infinite tenderness in that marvellous aria, "Walter's Prize Song." The young fellow was scarcely twenty and when he had responded with encore after encore, the audience went wild over him, fairly taking him by storm. Women clutched, kissed and embraced him while men showered him with coin and bills. Rhinecuff tossed him a twenty dollar gold piece. The boy's face glowed and for a moment he essayed to speak, then his voice choked, great tears of gratitude welled in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks and he was so overcome that he was forced to make a hasty exit.

The star of the evening was a danseuse, a mere slip of a girl who had reached her fifteenth year. She was slight and graceful, her long dark hair falling about her like night shadows. Her skin was white almost to transparency, her features delicate, and her eyes scintillated the wonder of beautiful childish innocence. As

she tripped forward, graceful and ethereal in her movements as some naiad of the mist, there was a gasp, an audible exclamation of admiration.

"A slip of a thing," observed Gebhard who had just arrived and now joined Anthony's table.

"A mere fledgling," commented Kent. "Rather young to flit away from the mother-bird. I fancy she and the young violinist are brother and sister."

"I daresay," mused Anthony. "There's a striking resemblance."

"Where'd you come from?" asked Casey of the man with the scar.

"From a confounded bridge-dinner," answered Horace Gebhard fiercely.

"Why didn't you come sooner?"

"Couldn't get away."

Carl Anthony laughed a low sinister laugh.

"Why didn't you do like I did?" he said.

"What?"

"I didn't go to the dinner but came here instead."

"I couldn't get out of it. Alicia made me go," said Gebhard.

"It's been a jolly evening," interpolated Kent. "See that man over there?" he asked after a moment, pointing to Rhinecuff.

"The one with the red head?" queried Gebhard, missing the direction.

"No, the man in black sitting against the wall."

"Yes, I see him. What about him?"

"Well, he's Wenson Rhinecuff. Do you know him?"

"No, don't think I ever saw him before."

"No one seems to know him."

"He looks—er—different, as if he might be foreign," commented Gebhard and for an instant, even from across the room, the eyes of the two men met. Rhinecuff's flashed. Gebhard, unable to endure the inquisition of the man's gaze, shifted his own way back to the beautiful young girl who gave as her last number a dance *a la Pavlowa*. For a space Rhinecuff gazed on her and wondered at one so young being allowed to exploit her art in such a place as this, and his heart contracted with pain.

Joseph Houlman had discovered the girl, Gladys Hiller, and her brother Walter in the east side and forthwith installed them in his famous cabaret, "The Morning-glory," and now, as he watched her in graceful rhythmical motion, Rhinecuff passed his hand across his eyes as if to shut out a picture that had remained with him for years, the memory of which now stung, came vividly before him. Again he saw a young girl pale and quivering, with beautiful dark hair, wonderful eyes expressive of frightened agony and dumb appeal, crouch away from him, an almost hopeless wreck, physically and mentally, but now, thank God, she was a woman with the light of dreams in her eyes.

That was years ago, yet the memory of it haunted him still. The child was now a woman and—Rhinecuff's memory of a blighted child's life was suddenly broken by a carnation striking him full in the face. A bit startled, he jerked himself together and when he spied his aggressor, seeing that it was no other than the little danseuse, Gladys Hiller, he laughed and forthwith returned the compliment. She looked up laughing and speedily disappeared. When he discovered her again,

she was seated at a table sipping champagne surrounded by a coterie of admirers.

At midnight, tables and chairs having been removed, the long room was converted into a dance hall, the scene becoming one of riotous color and fun, a veritable carnival; flags waved; roses and carnations fluttered in every direction; horns and whistles blew above the enticing strains of the tango, turkey-trot or hesitation, crying out the old and blowing in the New Year. Men sprayed women's gowns with intoxicating perfume while in turn the fair ones employed tiny water-pistols in shooting champagne down the throats of the men, the amber liquid frothing, bubbling, sparkling like golden mist in the grotto of Ariadne.

* * * * *

During this turmoil a man sneaked into the room; a man tall and angular with angular features. His face was white and quivering; eyes glared and bulged frightfully, almost from their sockets, hair dishevelled, collar undone, and his whole body shook violently as if he had undergone some terrible nervous shock. Slowly and feline he sidled along against the wall, fearful lest someone should see and speak to him. Seeing a low stool directly behind a group of eager, excited revellers, he reached it quickly and dropped onto it with grateful relief. He had come to this room to gain courage, be rid of the awful agony; to shun the vision of death but the vision clung to him.

Again he saw a still white face, a young form lying down in front of him, silent, rigid, with eyes glaring vacantly, glassily up at him. He groaned inwardly and bowed his head upon his long, murderous fingers. *Vance*

Beverly was a murderer. He had murdered Johan Vlot-sky! The boy had let him in as he had admitted other men and women to-night and when his young eyes rested on the tall, angular form of Beverly, he recognized him instantly, knew at once the man who had wronged, broken his sister Veta's life and brought an eternal tragedy into his own.

"You are Vance Beverly?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Yes," replied the man. "Well, confound you! what of it?"

"Damn you! I mean to kill and send you to hell!" cried Johan fiercely, lunging forward with a dirk-knife, the steel blade flashing menacingly, ugly, hellish gleams. Beverly started violently and slunk back, then sprang savagely upon the boy, clutching and curling his brutal fingers, like serpent coils, about the slender young throat, choking him into insensibility. With a sort of maniacal fury, he jerked off the blond wig, threw it aside, then bent back the head till something snapped. The boy's neck was broken! Johan was *dead!* He had died for Veta; died to avenge his sister's wrong.

It was over in a moment, done so easily and so quickly, so silently and scarcely without a struggle. Johan had watched and waited for this man but he would watch and wait no more. Marling had told him to keep on the lookout and when he had found the traitor, to come to him. He found Beverly but it had been no good, of no use and now he could not go to Marling. To-morrow would dawn but he could not enter upon his duty as office-boy to the district attorney. Veta would wait and wonder why he did not come, weep and pine for him. In his little shoe shop, Herman Vlotsky, too, would yearn

and wait for him; work and ply his trade with his paralytic companion, Arthur Vallerie, hoping, while he waited, mending shoes and making new ones.

They would all wait, and Marling, too, would wonder what had become of him, his boy friend, who lay there now dead upon the floor, clad in his suit of blue with buttons of gold.

What a horrible thing is murder! Ah, but the world swings round, unmindful of wrong, forgetful of tragedy!

As he gazed down upon the young form still in death, the man gloated, laughed gurglingly as if fascinated. The boy had threatened and he had killed him. Besides, the boy's sister haunted him like some terrible dream-spectre and it was telling on him, telling fearfully on his nerves so that he could not rest, could not sleep. As if out of vengeance, she was with him every moment, in his waking hours, following him in his dreams, till the very ghost of her was driving him mad.

If Veta knew that her brother was dead, that he had been murdered by the man who had betrayed and broken her life, very likely the knowledge would shock her to madness and, doubtless she would take her own life.

What if she did? thought Beverly. Then she would no longer pursue him and make his existence hell on earth. The thought, the sketching of her despair, her utter wretchedness, thrilled him, and again he laughed, but this time the sound of his own laughter frightened him almost to terror, reverberating like ghostly hollow echoes. Suddenly he shivered, his teeth began to chatter and he was seized with a violent trembling in the knees. He tried to shake off the fright that amounted to terror, but the effort was futile and he

leaned against the wall for support, essaying to control his over-shattered nerves.

From the café came the sound of men, and women's voices in boisterous hilarity, but Vance Beverly heard nothing, saw nothing but a boy's dead body a few feet away in front of him. What if someone should come and find out? He would be caught, thrown into prison and very likely condemned to the electric chair! *What if somebody did know, had seen him commit the crime?* God! they should not find out, they should not *know*! Beverly almost screamed aloud and stood for a moment waiting, his teeth grinding savagely. Then he thought a door closed; thought he heard an agonized cry of distress, someone coming, the swish of a woman's skirts. For a second he waited fearfully, breathlessly, his eyes glaring wildly, then, with a mad-man's energy, he rushed forward, caught up the dead boy in his arms, ran down the hall and turned into a narrow corridor. Hardly breathing and scarcely knowing what he was doing, he opened a dark cell like closet and hurled the lifeless body from him, hearing it fall in the darkness, a ghastly thud upon the floor. Having pulled to the door of the closet, Beverly hesitated a moment, leaned heavily against it, covering his eyes with his hands as if to shut out the ghastliness of it; then fled precipitately, his gaunt, angular body shadowing along the corridor like some foreboding apparition, disappearing inside the dance hall.

When he dropped upon the low stool behind a group of revellers, he was still over-wrought, fearful lest somebody had seen him kill Johan Vlotsky. But, then, no one had come into the hall; no one had been there. Everybody had his mind concentrated upon the pleasure of the

hour, and, after detailed reflection, he felt that no one could possibly have witnessed the crime. Indeed, he was sure no one saw, no one *knew*? This assurance brought happy relief. He was certain, too, that nobody had seen him come into the dance-hall, for if they had, they would have spoken to him.

With an effort, he endeavored to join in the merriment about him. After a while he rose from his seat and stood up to view the gay ensemble and in the joyous tumult spied a tall man in black, with clear cut features and wonderfully observing eyes; Rhinecuff held the angular man's attention and, as he gazed on him, Beverly speculated as to his identity. Who could *he* be? And why was *he* here at "The Morning-glory?" After a long moment Beverly put the speculation from him and shifted his eyes to a bewitching creature in purple, morning-glories sprayed in her hair and over her gown. She was laughing and chatting gaily with Anthony. Beverly was irascible and wretched. His nerves were painfully over-wrought and lately he had begun to fear everybody knew his double secret!

Joseph Houlman, too, had his double secret! Many men have their double secrets, their skeletons which they cover up by day and uncover by night! Or perchance conceal in some hidden closet for future generations to discover. Even now as he gazed about him, he was carried back to Veta Vlotsky, the beautiful girl whose life he had broken and blighted with frost. He thought he saw her now pursuing, shadowing him and once more he thought, too, that Johan was near and saw the dirk-knife flash and gleam. The vision clung to him, seemed so real that the blood flowed

liked iced liquid in his body and he shivered as with death cold.

"What the devil is the matter with you, Beverly?" demanded Anthony, turning round and suddenly gazing curiously at the stricken man. Beverly started violently, nearly losing self-control, at the sound of a voice addressing him.

"I—Ve-Veta—Johan—" he faltered pitiably, then broke off abruptly.

"To hell and damnation with your hallucinations!" said Anthony, wheeling and once more giving his attention to the lady of the morning-glories.

In another moment, hardly breathing and scarcely glancing at those about him, Beverly hurriedly slipped from the room and fled from the house out into the cold white night as if pursued by ghosts and demons.

* * * * *

The heathen had his fire-dance; the savage, his war-dance; the supposed civilized man, the dance of the Bacchanal, going back to the days of Rome and her wickedness.

Rhinecuff gazed before him on the ensemble, reflecting sadly upon the foibles and follies of humanity and, as his eyes traveled over the scene, a smile of supreme contempt parted his lips. Finally, in bored non-chalance, he strode out of the dance-hall and wended his way to the gambling stall, crowded with young men and young women, many of them mere boys and girls. Every table was filled, surrounded by anxious spectators watching breathlessly the game and play of chance. Here Conden held sway, manipulating the "wheel!" watching it swing in the right direction, filling the pockets of his boss,

Joseph Houlman, head of the Commercial League. He was in his glory and his hideously pitted features grinned and contorted in gleeful satisfaction as he filched from the youth of Christian their last coin. And so, this was one way Joseph Houlman and his cohorts had of fleecing the lambs! God! what outlawry! What criminality!

To-night in the gambling stall of "The Morning-glory," interest centered chiefly about the roulette table. Men and women gathered round, watching breathlessly and eagerly every turn of the wheel, bringing with it good or ill, joy or despair. Excitement ran high, stakes running heavily. Kent, Casey and Horace Gebhard stood by watching the players and urging them on. Anthony, too, and his lady of the morning-glories stood near, waiting, expectant.

Over the table bent two youthful faces, eyes fixed on the revolving disc, staking their all to win or lose in a game of chance, giving back, maybe, their earnings of the evening to Joseph Houlman! And these two? Ah, could it be! Rhinecuff passed his hand across his eyes as if to dissipate the mist, then hurriedly threaded his way to the gaming table. Yes, there they were, boy and girl, the little danseuse and her brother, Gladys and Walter Hiller! At his approach they did not look up, instead, gazed intently, feverishly before them. For a time they had won, now they were losing. Fortune no longer favored them. Another turn of the wheel and they would win or lose everything; another moment, the end! The boy breathed hard and his eyes glittered fiercely while the girl stood white and quivering, her delicate features twitching, slender fingers tightly interlaced.

Rhinecuff clinched his hands till the nails dug into the

flesh and ground his teeth silently. God! what were cabarets and gambling stalls doing for the youth of the land. Looking down at the little danseuse, he lightly touched her arm. At once she glanced up meeting his eyes questioningly.

"What! you here at the gaming-table?" he asked in low, hoarse tones.

"Yes. Why not?" she answered lightly. "It's great, perfectly fascinating!"

"But if you lose?" he questioned fearfully.

"Ah, if I *win*!" she exclaimed excitedly.

"*But if you lose?*" he insisted strongly.

"Then no one is hurt but myself!" she flung back defiantly.

"*Don't!*" he remonstrated pleadingly.

"Oh, but I must!" she breathed feverishly. "Walter and I must! We *must* win!" she whispered breathlessly. "We want to do big things in the world!"

"But you will never do big things in the world staking all at a gaming table," said Rhinecuff emphatically. "Stop now before it is too late," he entreated gently, but she did not heed, did not weigh his words of warning. Swiftly she glanced across at her brother, who met her eyes for an instant then shifted his gaze back to his number, watching the wheel turn slowly. Another revolution, then the end. Both had staked all and lost; had swept from them their earnings of the evening! For a second the youthful pair lingered, then rose hastily from the table.

"Come, Gladys, let's go home," said the boy in dead tones, his hand shaking perceptibly as he brushed away a shock of long hair that lined his forehead. The girl

burst into a torrent of weeping. Silently Walter Hiller manfully folded an arm about his sister and urged her forward.

"Don't go yet," said Rhinecuff, laying a detaining hand on the boy's shoulder. "Wait! I mean to have a turn at the wheel!" and, planting himself in the place vacated by young Hiller, recklessly staked a good round sum while Conden set the disc in motion, it spinning, humming in heartless monotone. Conden's eyes glinted with keen exultation. As he had promised Houlman, he would give Rhinecuff a chance, let him have a snap for a time and then—well—

"It's a great night," he whispered. Houlman smiled gratification.

Rhinecuff's gaze never left the wheel. Another revolution and the wheel stopped. Rhinecuff won! A little scream burst from Gladys Hiller, while her brother gave a rousing cheer.

A woman's laughter rang out in clear silvery ripples like gurgling trills in a bird's throat. She had entered quietly, her movements langorous, graceful, and now, as she stood there leaning against the roulette table, everybody turned to stare and murmur in low admiration. She was superb in her gown of black spangled net sparkling like star-gleams in the night-time, her wealth of Titian hair poised on a faultless pair of shoulders. As he looked at her, Horace Gebhard gave a gasp; Carl Anthony drew nearer to the table, while Joseph Houlman smiled exultantly, passion in his eyes. But Pappeia Ardeth had no thought for anyone except Rhinecuff. For a moment she debated, then seated herself across from him, smilingly giving him her beautiful

eyes of violet-gray, playful and variable as rainbow tints. She did not participate but intently watched him play the game, leaning her white elbows on the table, her cheek resting on slender, jeweled fingers. Rhinecuff bowed courteously, hazarded another stake as if seized by a mad recklessness. Young Hiller and his sister looked on feverishly, thrilled by excitement. They hoped Rhinecuff would win. Somehow they wanted him to win.

"Go it, Rhinecuff! Go it!" cried Casey. "Watch the wheel. Don't let them beat you out!"

The wheel spun round then stopped. Rhinecuff won again, and this time rose from his chair. Young Hiller gave another rousing cheer, and his sister uttered a cry of delight. Conden looked disappointed, for he had hoped to have a fling at Rhinecuff.

"Don't be a quitter!" he jeered. "Play the game! Ante up another stake!"

"Not to-night," said Rhinecuff emphatically.

"You are indeed a lucky man," remarked Pappeia, smiling bewitchingly.

"Yes, quite lucky," assented Rhinecuff. He had staked and won heavily.

"You know the game," commented the man of the League with a rakish smile, then passed on to speak to others, losing himself in the crowd.

Going over to young Hiller, Rhinecuff extended to him a roll of bills, the result of his winning.

"Here, boy, take back your money," he said. "It's yours, and don't ever again enter a gambling stall. Cabarets and gambling stalls wreck more men and women than any other two things in the world."

The boy and his sister looked up in amazement, their

faces white and wondering. Everyone now stared questioningly, speculatively, piqued by curiosity.

"Who was this Rhinecuff?" And why should he offer the money to the boy? Walter Hiller smiled gratefully.

"No, I can't take it," he said with manly spirit. "I staked and lost and must suffer the consequences. No, I can't take the money."

"But they tricked you," urged Rhinecuff, "and your little sister there."

"No, no, I can't. I won't," protested the boy strongly.

"No, no, we can't," repeated the girl falteringly. "My brother is right. We staked and lost and must suffer the ——"

"But I tell you they *tricked* you!" insisted Rhinecuff. "They planned to rob you of your evening's earnings. These men are robbers, pirates and whenever they can, they hold up the young and innocent. Take the money," he urged, "and go home like good children. Boy, take your sister home."

Without more ado, young Hiller took the money from Rhinecuff and, when they had thanked him warmly, he and his sister speedily departed, joy and gratitude depicted in their faces.

For a space there was a breathless moment.

"Who are you?" demanded Kent.

A tentative smile played over the features of the man in black.

"I am Wenson Rhinecuff," he responded nonchalantly.

"But *what* are you?" insisted Kent. "What is your business, I mean?"

"Oh," returned Rhinecuff coolly, "I am, well, I am in the service of the *government*!"

A gasp swept the room. Conden, Casey, Kent and Gebhard whitened to the lips and waited. Joseph Houltman was nowhere to be seen.

"In the service of the government?" repeated Kent agitatedly, looking about him fearfully.

"Yes."

For a minute no one spoke, no one stirred, all holding their breath in bated silence.

"Then you are a secret service man," shot out Kent uneasily.

"Well, what of it?" queried Rhinecuff.

"You won't betray, won't shut us up yet?" drivelled Conden.

"The law says *one o'clock*," announced Rhinecuff emphatically. "It is now *five minutes past two*!"

"But," blurted out Kent, "we've—we've—"

"Paid to keep open all night," interpolated Rhinecuff, finishing the sentence.

"Yes," whispered Kent, "*We've paid to keep open all night!*"

"No, but you haven't paid *me!*" cut in Rhinecuff boldly.

"No, we haven't paid *you!*" breathed Kent in relief. Rhinecuff laughed.

"*Even government officials have their price*," he said.

Again Kent breathed in relief. The rest of them smiled blandly.

"Then you have your price?" queried Kent. Rhinecuff nodded.

"Yes, that is to be expected! Everyone has his price nowadays! To-day graft is in the blood, the ambition

of the moment! It is the sin of the nation! Yes, I have my price!"

"And your price?" demanded Kent.

"Fifteen hundred!" shot out Rhinecuff. "No less!"

Houlman's man stared aghast.

"Whew!" ejaculated Kent.

"No less!" repeated Rhinecuff emphatically. Without another word Kent hurried away for a moment, then came back.

"Here's your check, Mr. Rhinecuff," he said, holding out the slip. "I think you will find it O. K."

Rhinecuff nodded and, taking from an inside pocket a number of slips, scanned them critically.

"*Worthless*, all of them!" he ejaculated sternly, handing back the papers.

"Worthless?" inquired Kent in surprise, examining the papers. He was amazed that this man should be in possession of checks given to the police chief and other city officials. The deuce, how *did* he get them?

"How did you get these?" he demanded sharply, whitening suddenly.

"Seaborn and the rest of them gave them to me!"

"*Why did they give them to you?*"

"Be-because they are *worthless!*" repeated Rhinecuff with emphasis.

"Worthless?" questioned the other uneasily.

"Yes. Houlman has not signed them."

Kent laughed somewhat relieved.

"Oh, he never signs them. Conden and I do *that*. They are all right, perfectly *all right*."

"No, they're not! Houlman must sign them!" said Rhinecuff with decision, "*I—we want his signature.*"

"Heretofore our checks have never been questioned," replied Kent with irritation.

"No one has ever made the demand, and, damn it! I don't see why you should kick."

"What in the devil is the matter?" demanded Houlman, coming up at this moment, his eyes squinting and scrutinizing the two men with palpable indignation, yet letting a smile play insidiously over his features.

"He says," explained Kent, "these checks are no good, that——"

"What's wrong?" questioned the man of the League, taking the slips from Rhinecuff and scanning them critically. For a minute a fierce, puzzled expression crossed his face and a strange light glittered in his eyes.

"They are all right," he added after a moment, "perfectly all right. I can't see that there is anything the matter with them." Houlman met the eyes of the man in black and a tentative smile still hovered on his lips.

"You have not signed them."

Rhinecuff spoke out sharply, determinedly. Houlman stared and shrugged his shoulders, the smile broadening about his mouth, showing his big yellow teeth.

"Conden and Kent make out the checks and—well, they do the rest," and he laughed as he turned the sentence. "No, I never sign them."

"I told him you didn't," put in Kent.

"Then I won't accept them," said Rhinecuff coolly.

The two men looked straight at each other and, for a time, they argued fiercely.

"I won't sign them!" said Houlman.

"You will sign them!" returned Rhinecuff authorita-

tively and with decision. "Do you hear that? *I mean to have your signature!*"

For a space the chief of the pirates hesitated. He saw the look in the man's eyes. Then slowly and deliberately he reached for the slips and signed them carefully, then handed them back to his exacting demander. Rhinecuff too, examined them critically, then let his fingers close tightly over them before putting them into his inside pocket. Again the eyes of the two met and for an instant, they glared fiercely at each other. The moment was silent, tense, fraught with approaching developments. Kent watched the two excitedly. *What* was going to happen? Then Houlman whitened suddenly and drew back; his hands clinched, eyes blood-shot, the nerves in his face twitching painfully. One brief second the two glared menacingly, then Houlman sprang forward, his eyes flashing hell-fire, his face still gray with pallor.

"*You devil!*" he hissed savagely.

"*Damn you!*" gnashed the other threateningly, his jaws squared and tightening to compression, eyes glittering with the flame of fury in them. "In the name of the *law* you are under arrest! And, by God! I have *proof* this time that the Judge and jury will not question!"

"In the name of hell! what's happened?" demanded Casey, forcing his way through the group that had gathered about the two men, the heat and clash of words having created unexpected commotion.

"*That man there,*" cried Joseph Houlman shrilly, pointing his finger at Rhinecuff, "*is Douglas Marling the district Attorney.*"

It was, indeed, Douglas Marling, the district attorney,

come to gather evidence and raid the place. That very morning when Anthony had said that Marling might raid "The Morning-glory" in 64th Street, Houlman had scoffed at the idea and declared that he was not of the right stuff, that he was not a dare-devil. But to-night Marling had proved his mettle. He had made Joseph Houlman, chief of the pirates and man of the "League", sign the checks! He had come for evidence and he had it in *a few little slips of paper!* Houlman, astute, alert, scarcely waiting to determine the effect of his words, fearing inevitable capture if he lingered, darted out from among the crowd, who stared dumbly, and disappeared. Anthony and Horace Gebhard, too, were gone and nowhere to be found. They had skillfully and artfully eluded the police chief, Grey Seaborn, who had come to 64th Street, with several of his men to assist Marling in the raid. Even though the ring leaders had cunningly and successfully escaped, Conden, Kent and Casey along with the majority of the gamblers were taken into custody and whisked off to the police station as speedily as the driving snow-storm would permit.

The rest of the men, goaded and maddened by excitement, sought to escape, fighting their way out, scrambling over chairs and tables, yelling fiercely and uttering oaths and curses. Suddenly, in the midst of this turmoil, the moment because one of terror, demoniacal hysteria; women screamed; there was a crash, a dense volume of smoke then a lurid burst of flame. The interior of the building was on fire!

Outside in the dark, dead, silent night, the snow raged and stormed, the wind driving it like mad from out the sky. Through the great white mist, lurid flames, burst

and shot upward, their hungry red tongues licking greedily, cleaving walls and roof, while frozen silver stars showered downward, the two, fire and snow, fighting for mastery, one breathing hell and passion; the other, heaven and purity!

Suddenly there was another crash, another tumbling of walls, then a man, clad in priest's garb, was seen to rush out of the burning building, gesticulating wildly, crying dramatically, insanely:

"A priest must not burn to death! *A priest must not burn to death!*"

The man was Father Gleason!

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Clematis wrenched herself free from Anthony and passed Marling on the threshold of the library, she went straight to her room, threw herself upon the bed and sobbed. For hours she lay there, no one coming to make inquiry, and offer consolation.

Luncheon hour came and went but she did not go down. Marling and Gebhard lunched down town. Perhaps, too, Alicia was lunching out. Clematis hoped she was as she did not wish to be disturbed; she preferred to be alone to think matters out. Marling had never explained fully why he had taken her from Vallerie but assured her briefly that it was because of his shameful brutality to her. Had that been really the one and only reason? Again and again she put the question.

And had he sold her? *Her father!* Could he have done a thing so criminal, so barbarous? Good God! No! *Impossible!*

Only to-day and from Gebhard she had learned that he was living a helpless paralytic, making his home with Hermann Vlotsky, a shoe-maker, in Wilburton. He had never been to see her, even written to her. Should she go to him now? Was it her duty? In his distressing affliction, severe retribution, did he repent? And if he did and he needed, wanted her why had he not written, sent for her? Doubtless he feared to let her know because he thought she remembered and she had not forgiven. And why not forgive? She really had no

claim on Marling. The child marriage was not valid. If she were really his wife and he cared for her, he would, long ago, have reminded her of the fact and proclaimed it to the world. But since he had remained silent, perhaps it was a *fake* marriage and she had been——”

At the recurrence of the thought, she buried her face in her arms and sobbed. Gebhard's ugly suggestion of barter had shocked her painfully. She tried not to think of it; tried not to believe it.

Softly the door opened and Marietta entered, bearing a dainty waiter. Clematis slowly lifted her head from her arms and sat up. She really did not care for anything but since Marietta had been so kind she lightly partook of the repast, then pushed the tray from her and dropped back among her pillows. The maid, satisfied that she did not need anything, took up the tray and passed out quietly.

Clematis was glad she had gone, glad to be alone, once more to battle with the same old thoughts.

For hours she fought till she was feverish and wretched. Her head ached fearfully. Unable to bear this distraction of mind, she rose and rang for Marietta, walking restlessly up and down her beautifully appointed room while she waited. She had decided to go out. She thought a brisk walk in the crisp air would do her good and gladden her heart.

Clad in her long musquash, her hands in her soft brown muff, Marietta's deft fingers having pinned her hat and veil, she wended her way down stairs. Before going out, she lingered for a moment at the door of Marling's study. It was closed and for the fraction of

a second she leaned against it, choking back a sob. Then she hurried out. On reaching the street she was keenly disappointed, for she had hoped for sunshine. But there was not that glory of the morning. The sky was overcast, and there was every indication of a frightful snow-storm at or before night-fall.

She did not go to the park, but confined her walk to the principal residence portion. She walked for blocks, meeting few people, the chill in the air tingling her face and stirring her blood. Those whom she met she did not know. In fact she was indifferent to everything. Nothing mattered, not even a terrific snow-storm.

She passed many handsome residences and beautiful churches, wonderful in design and architecture. When she reached the church of the Ascension, she noted that people were going in, for it was four o'clock, time for service. She lingered debating whether or not to follow their example, but, on second thought, passed on, preferring to remain in the open. A little farther down, a number of street urchins were playing snowball, pelting one another in great delight.

As she watched the boys at play, she felt someone brush suddenly against her and, looking up, discovered she stood face to face with Father Gleason! A cry rose to her lips but she checked it and recoiled. He held out his hand but she ignored it and kept her own within her muff.

"Don't be frightened," he said coaxingly, a thin smile playing about his shaven lips. "Ah, my dear daughter, God knows I would not murder you in cold blood. Remember what I have done and am doing for girls and young women! I *befriend* them! I make it my business

to hunt them up and insure them employment. I see that they are fed and clothed and that they have a good home to go to at night. If you were poor and unprotected," he added laying his hand upon her arm and looking straight into her eyes, "I should take you under my wing, furnish you with a very fine home, befitting your refinement and requisites. In fact you should have your heart's desire. However," and he laughed softly, withdrawing his hand, "you don't need my care and protection. Marling's a rich fellow and very likely gratifies your slightest whim. And, since he is so liberal, won't you give me something for my home for women and young girls? It is a needful institution, a home of charity. Mine is an arduous task and I need money in my work. You don't know how I struggle, to keep things going. God! child, you don't know!"

Scarcely recovered, Clematis drew back from the priest. She felt greatly relieved when he removed his hand from her arm, and, now as she stood there, she wondered how she could be rid of him; wondered if she fled if he would follow her.

She glanced furtively about her, but there was no one in sight; then when she once more shifted her eyes to the man before her, she noted that he was scanning her keenly, and that the same wily smile still loitered about his mouth.

"What about the contribution?" he queried. "You will give me something?"

"No," she replied calmly, under great difficulty. "I have no money with me."

He laughed and the sound of his laughter jarred upon her fearfully.

"I can't think of a woman like you without money," he said. "You should at least have your vanity box with car fare. As for the contribution," he continued easily, "of course you cannot give it to me now, since you have no money with you but you can send it to me in the way of a check, post office order or place to my credit in bank, as you please. There are various means a woman can give a man money for charity. You will give me something?" he insisted, keeping his eyes upon her.

"I—I—perhaps I—yes, I will," she answered coldly. "I will send you something."

"Ah, I knew you would. Thank you, daughter. You are a good, charitable woman. You are different from, well from Marling. They say he doesn't give money readily, that he's a clincher where Gebhard is concerned. I've no doubt he gives you all the money you want. You have qualities and requisites and beauty, too, that please, gratify and hold a man. Why a woman like you, if you cared, could——"

Clematis did not suffer him to conclude his sentence but fled, ever and anon glancing back, fearful lest he were endeavoring to overtake her, but he was nowhere to be seen. Once and for all assuring herself that he was not in pursuit, she halted for breath, and when she had regained her poise, she found herself in front of a magnificent sacred edifice, the church of the Immaculate Conception, beautiful in architectural design, its noble facade wonderfully expressive of old Biblical glory.

Despite the gray, over-hanging snow-clouds, people were pouring into the building. Mounting the steps and leaning against one of the massive marble columns, Clematis scrutinized the many faces that wended past her.

She did not want to go home, for she knew the old thoughts would assail her and heart-aches return. She lingered in the solitude of the sacred precinct because it was comforting and she liked being there in the portico of a church of God.

Within the holy walls the great organ throbbed and sung, holding its hearers silent under the master hand. The wonderful tones floated out to Clematis and she listened entranced. She yearned to go in but hesitated, and, as she stood there debating there was the faintest whiff of violets and a woman, stylishly attired in a tailored gown and wearing beautiful sables, swiftly passed and vanished like the rest. In the hasty glimpse of her, Clematis recognized a dear friend, Mrs. Alfred Penrose. In another moment, the woman reappeared and approached Clematis.

"How do you do?" she greeted cordially, extending her hand. "When I passed just now I thought it was you, so I came back to make sure."

"I am so glad to see you," smiled Clematis, clasping her friend's proffered hand. "You are looking well, Mrs. Penrose."

"Oh, yes, I always feel splendidly, thank you. And you?"

"Quite well, thank you. Please don't let me keep you."

"Oh, you are not keeping me," promptly returned Mrs. Penrose. "Were you waiting for someone? I suppose you've come to the organ recital."

"No, no, I was out for a walk," explained Clematis a little nervously, "and somehow, before I was aware of it, I—I found myself here and lingered."

"Do come in for the recital and sit in my pew," warmly

entreated Mrs. Penrose. "Adolph Heine is our organist and we are very proud of him. You will come now, won't you, and sit with me?"

"Indeed I will with great pleasure," responded Clematis appreciatively.

Another moment the two passed the portals and were ushered to the Penrose pew.

Sitting there she forgot her own sorrow and heart-ache; forgot everything, even her meeting with Father Gleason. All were relegated to sweet oblivion and she knew nothing except that she was listening to Adolph Heine!

When the last chord sounded, floating away to silence, Clematis gave a swift intake of breath and smiled gratefully into Mrs. Penrose's eyes. It had been a rare enjoyment, and even in her own room, Mrs. Penrose having motored her home in her electric brougham, she listened to the recital all over again and heard, even in the organ tones, the play of flute, sweep of violin and song of harp.

She was still revelling in organ dreams when dinner was announced. She dined in her own room, as she did not wish to encounter Gebhard and have him tax her with her promise of the morning. She had not seen Marling to make her demand. Marietta said he had not come in and also stated that the Gebhards were going to the Van Horns' for a bridge dinner.

Clematis was glad Horace Gebhard was going out for the evening. She tried to forget what he had told her.

Could Marling have done that thing? Clematis shivered in nervous agitation. She clasped her hands tightly till they clinched and crushed them against her breast, the

soft glow of the electrolier and the delicate pink of her gown, accentuating the feverish flush in her face. A half sob nearly broke from her lips but she choked it back and rose incontinently, took several strides up and down the room, then moved to her dressing-table, fingered with a few toilet articles, finally opening a bottle and spraying on the front of her gown a drop or two of delicate Azurea. Then mechanically she fastened on a bunch of orchids.

"Ah, my dear Clematis, I think you have on quite enough rouge," laughed Alicia. "Your face is flaming."

Clematis looked up startled and turned quickly from her dressing table. She had not heard Alicia knock; had not seen her enter. She had no desire to bare things to Alicia. They had never been very close friends.

"I—I think I am over-heated," she answered a little nervously. "I will request James to turn off some of the heat. He keeps the house very warm."

"I think it is quite comfortable," returned Alicia. "You look feverish. Are you ill?"

"No, no. Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you, I haven't time. Horace and I are going to the Van Horns' for an auction bridge-dinner and we are due there now. I came in just for you to have a look at my gown. Give it inspection and tell me how you like it," and she turned round slowly, then came and stood directly under the chandelier. Clematis switched on more light, that she might glory in a flood of effulgence.

When she had given thorough inspection, she said with marked sincerity:

"Alicia, you are dazzling."

"But do you like my gown?" she insisted. "Horace says I look like a vaudeville actress. He is in a horrid mood to-night. He never tells me I look well."

"Yes, you are beautiful, your gown is lovely and ——"

"Do you really mean that?" interrupted Alicia eagerly.

"Of course I do. I never say things I do not mean. I do hope you will enjoy the evening."

"I always enjoy auction bridge," smiled Alicia, and with a parting goodnight she swept from the room, leaving the door ajar. When she had gone Clematis switched off some of the light and then as she was about to close her door, she heard Gebhard mutter "Damn it," as he and Alicia passed down stairs on their way out. Her face flushed as she thought of his wicked, brutal story, and her eyes welled with burning tears. She brushed them away hastily, moved wearily over to her big chair, re-seated herself and picked up the Psalms of David. For two hours or more she read trying to forget, seeking consolation in the songs of a great king, but it was of no use; her head ached, her brain tortured by cruel, maddening thoughts refused to concentrate itself but shifted, ever shifted back to Marling. She wondered if he had come, if he were in his study. She must see him and make her demand for Gebhard. There was no reason why she should wait. Nervously she passed her hand over her eyes, closed her book, rose and went down to his study.

Marling was not there. He had left word that he would be out late and not to wait for him. What kept him? Doubtless it was something urgent . . . Clematis glanced at the clock. It was nearly ten, and it suddenly flashed upon her that it was almost the hour for Pappia

Ardeth. For a time the woman had slipped her mind but now she recalled her look of decision, her determination to call to-night at ten. Clematis knew by the tone of her voice, the straight look in her eyes, that she was coming to see her. Was it to discuss Douglas Marling?

Ten o'clock sounded, Clematis listened for the last stroke and waited; there was a silken swish, a delicate whiff of Azurea and Pappeia Ardeth stood before her—regal, superb, having let her long fur coat slip away from her white shoulders and drop to the floor.

She was a woman who knew how to make everything count, every movement, every expression. For a moment she stood silent, then bent down, picked up her coat which was silvered with snow and hung it over the back of a chair.

The two women then looked straight into each others eyes.

"Prompt, am I not?" she began by way of greeting. "I never fail to keep my appointments."

"Mr. Marling is not here and he will not be back until late," returned Clematis indifferently. "I would not advise you to wait."

"I did not come to see Mr. Marling," responded the woman. "I came to see *you*."

Clematis leaned against Marling's desk and gazed inquiringly at her visitor.

"Why did you come to see me?" she demanded quietly.

"I came in the name of love of woman for woman," answered Pappeia. "You don't know, perhaps never heard of me, but for a long time I have known of you. Johan has told Veta and me a great deal about you. Besides——"

"And how is Veta?" asked Clematis, interested in her because of Johan.

"She is wasting away, gradually wasting, I am afraid. The poor soul's life is perhaps blighted forever. She was lured into a fake marriage by Vance Beverly. But you don't know, you can't know what that means. I, too once didn't know, never dreamed of such a thing. I was an only child. My father was overly indulgent. I was his idol. When I was sixteen a man came into my life and I became infatuated with him. My father disapproved of him bitterly and threatened to shut me up in a tower like the beautiful sun-haired Danae. But I rebelled at this and so ran away with my trusted lover to go through a fake marriage, but at the time I did not know and believed in him. When I had a chance, I wrote to my father, imploring him to come and take me away, but I never heard from him. At last when I was free to go, I went beseeching him on my knees, my little boy in my arms, to take me back, telling him the man whom I loved and trusted had proved a traitor. Instead of pitying and forgiving, he closed his heart against me, shutting me out of his house and his life forever. He will never forgive, never, never, *never!* And now I have no one, no one!" and, dropping on the couch near her, she buried her face in her arms, sobbing softly. Clematis half turned away, essaying to choke back the lump that rose in her throat. Unlike this woman, she had never known such bitterness, such heart anguish!

Then she spoke gently:

"You have your boy."

Pappeia lifted her head, sat up and brushed away the mist of tears.

"My boy, ah, my boy!" she breathed. "Thank God!" she added fiercely, her eyes flashing, "he is like me, his mother, and not like the devil, his father!"

"Ah—and his father?" questioned Clematis, scarcely breathing, still standing with her back half turned toward Pappeia, her fingers cold and twitching as they toyed unconsciously with the printed sheets of a legal report.

"His father," returned Pappeia, "is the man I loved and trusted. *The man is Horace Gebhard!*"

Smothering a cry of joy, Clematis crushed her hands against her breast. She was glad Pappeia had come, if only to tell her this.

"You don't know Mr. Marling well?" she hazarded slowly and with great effort at carelessness. She laughed from sheer nervousness.

"No," responded Pappeia, "only casually. I did not know him until a year or so ago, then I met him through that beast Horace Gebhard," and she snapped together her white teeth, glaring angrily before her. "I have given Horace Gebhard something," she continued harshly, rising abruptly, "he will never forget. I gave him that scar that streaks his cheek like a mark of blood, but that is not enough," she added vehemently. "I mean to have more vengeance! We women forgive too readily. When women exact of men what men exact of women, then, and not until then, will the scales be evenly balanced. Oh, I suppose one must complete the circle and live, and, to live, you know, one must feel the entire gamut of human emotion. And I," she went on tensely, rapidly, "know them all, have lived the full gamut, from love to torture. God knows I am not entirely wicked. If I were, I should not be here tonight. I came to warn

you against Douglas Marling! He is no god but a man like the rest! He is living a double life, a life of rank hypocrisy like Joseph Houlman and Vance Beverly! That which came out in the paper about him is true but you . . . ”

“I—I didn’t see it,” Clematis managed to say faintly.

“No, you didn’t see it,” asserted Pappeia, “because he burned it.”

Clematis looked up startled and stared, white and amazed at the woman before her. She wondered how Pappeia knew but did not ask. She felt that where there was so much smoke there was flame, yet she did not want to doubt Marling.

“I am glad I haven’t seen it,” she said after a moment, with a touch of fierceness, fighting back the doubts and tears. “Douglas Marling would not deliberately do wrong. He is all honor, all nobility. If the Evening Chronicle printed ugly things about him, they are entirely false! I won’t believe anything against him!”

“Don’t,” admonished Pappeia, “don’t trust him too implicitly. If you were really his wife and he had acknowledged you, you might have faith in him. But he has kept silent and never let even you know. Besides there is something he guards more than his life, something he has kept and will keep hidden from you; something that, if you knew, you would despise him to your last breath; perhaps you would murder him or kill yourself!”

“Oh, what are you saying? What do you mean?” cried Clematis. She shivered and her breath came flutteringly.

“Wh-what is it? Tell me—I—I want to know?”

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"Do not ask me. I cannot tell you!" said Pappeia.

"But you must, you shall tell me!" cried Clematis excitedly. You have no right to keep it from me. No matter what it is, it is my right to know."

"It is your right to know but I cannot tell you," reiterated the woman emphatically and with decision. "I am sworn to secrecy. If you would know, ask Douglas Marling. Ask him why he played the noble hero, and—well—took you from your father, inveigled you into some sort of marriage with him which you have forgotten, well, brought you up as his ward and not as his wife. Go to the root of things; and if he tells you, does not lie to you, you will simply loathe him. Go, I beseech you, go! Don't wait until it is too late, far too late!"

The woman paused a moment, gazing wistfully at Clematis. Silently she slipped into her fur coat.

Clematis turned instantly, colored hotly, her eyes flashing angry defiance.

"You had better go at once. Doubtless, you mean to be kind, but I hope you won't put yourself out to come again."

Slowly, Pappeia moved toward the door, a mist of tears in her eyes.

"Oh, don't, don't believe in him too implicitly," she implored, a note of pain in her voice. "It is an awful thing to trust a man and find he is a traitor. When it is too late, then, perhaps, you will recall my words of warning; you will remember! *Forget me not!*"

There was a deep stillness. Clematis, with head bent, her back half turned toward the woman, remained motionless, breathing tensely. Pappeia watched her while she drew the soft fur collar about her throat and

caught up her muff. She realized that her visit was fruitless. For a moment she waited, the door half ajar, her free hand upon the knob. As she stood there on the threshold, there was something of the wonder and beauty of divinity in her eyes.

"God keep you safe, safe and happy," she breathed with unsuppressed emotion. Then she added in a sort of desperation, "God knows I meant to be kind. I have warned you! I am not so wicked, so terribly wicked as to deliberately and willfully cause you pain. But believe me if you knew what Douglas Marling did years ago; how he happened to, well, how he got you and——"

"You mean——?" exclaimed Clematis hysterically, then her voice broke. But the woman was gone and the cry of the stricken heart met with no response, echoing pitifully, in the dead hush.

Clematis dropped to the floor, grovelling in her anguish, hiding her face and weeping violently. What did Pappia mean? What did she know?

Clematis was nearly mad. She rose suddenly and began to pace rapidly up and down the room, her hands clasped tightly with fingers interlaced, her forehead touching them. Could she have meant what Horace Gebhard had told her, that she had been bartered? Could she have meant that? Oh God! could she have meant that?

Restlessly and excitedly she walked up and down, trying to recall what Marling had done and she had forgotten. If only she remembered! She walked until she burned, then she sank into the revolving chair before Marling's desk and closed her eyes. The clock chimed the half hour. She glanced up and noted that it was

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eleven-thirty. Then shifting her eyes back to the desk, she observed for the first time the empty vase and she colored slightly, for it was her initial offence of neglect. She had failed to replace the withered flowers with beautiful fresh ones. Only that morning Marling had emptied out the dead orchids. She wondered what Marling thought of her; why he did not come. Listlessly she picked up a volume of poems by Rossetti, the inspiration of his beautiful wife, and tried to read, but worn, distracted, she laid the book aside and closed her eyes. She knew she could not sleep until she had spoken to Marling. She would sit up and wait for him, no matter how late.

Wearily she rose, and passed into the drawing-room, moved to the piano, letting her fingers ripple along the ivory keys, drifting from piece to piece, glorying in the beauty of the masters, finally trailing off into MacDowell's "To a Water-Lily" redolent of woodland sweetness and infinite tenderness.

When the last note echoed to silence, Clematis got up, closed the instrument and went back to the study, there to find Marling standing in the middle of the room, his hair dishevelled, and his clothes mussed and hanging about him loosely. Clematis started a little, for she had never seen him quite like this before. Where had he been? Had anything happened?

"You play well," he observed.

"Thank you. You look dishevelled."

"Yes, I am a bit dishevelled, I've been in a fire. Seaborn and I fought like—like demons to get the women and girls out of the burning building, and——"

"In a fire? You weren't hurt?" she asked quickly.

"No, didn't even have my hair singed."

She was immensely relieved.

"Where was the fire?"

"In Sixty-fourth Street."

"Then you—you were at 'The Morning-glory?'" she questioned fearfully and with a swift intake of breath.

His fine gray eyes gazed back squarely into hers and a wisp of dark hair lined his forehead.

"Yes, I was there. As district attorney, it is my business to look into such places and prosecute the offenders. *I have evidence!*" he added emphatically and he drew from an inside pocket a number of slips, given him as Wensom Rhinecuff with Houlman's signature, and placed them in his desk, closed the lid and locked it. Then he glanced at the clock and noted that it was two-thirty.

"Clematis, it is very late. You should have gone to bed long ago. Did you wait for me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I—I wanted to see you, to—to ask you something."

"Well, what is it?"

For a second Clematis waited scarcely daring to make her request.

"What is it, Clematis?" he questioned again.

"I wanted to—to ask you for—for——"

"Money?" he finished with a laugh. She was glad he supplemented the word.

"Yes," she said, greatly relieved.

"Don't be afraid," he chided gently. "I have never been very stingy with you, have I?"

"No, you've always been generous."

"Well, how much do you want?"

"Oh, a—a great deal," she faltered.

"How much?" he insisted, watching the play of emotion in her face.

"Ten thousand," she answered finally and in an almost inaudible tone.

"Ten thousand?"

"Yes."

"I presume you want it for a trousseau," he said quietly, after a moment.

Glancing up, Clematis caught the look of deep earnestness in his eyes.

"This morning," he continued in the same tone, "when I discovered you and Anthony in the library, you seemed quite fond of him. I suppose you are going to marry him?"

"No, I don't want it for a trousseau. I want it for ——"

"What?" he interrupted.

"For—for charity," she continued with nervous quickness.

"I hope you will dispose of it judiciously."

"I—I am sure I will dispose of it judiciously," she breathed, not trusting herself to look at him. Marling eyed her inquiringly, sat down at his desk, wrote out the check for the amount and handed it to her. Clematis felt the hot blood mount to her face, and hated herself for her deception. She scanned the slip critically, then let her fingers tighten, till they almost crumpled it and finally glanced at Marling.

"Thank you," she said, her face still flushed.

"Don't mention it."

Somehow a strained relationship had suddenly sprung up between them.

"I can give you nothing," she told him with an impatient abruptness, dropping the bit of paper inside her gown.

"I ask for nothing," he said, his eyes still upon her. "It is sufficient to have you here. I am deeply in your debt. You have given happiness to a lonely man; been star-light in the shadows."

"But you've been good, always good," she couldn't help saying.

"No, Clematis, only keeping the promise I made," he answered, then continued hoarsely and with a touch of fierceness, catching her wrists and holding her before him. "My God! Clematis, do you know what you are to me? You are my wife!" She did not smile, did not throw her arms about his neck impelled by great happiness as he had hoped, dreamed, but instead she struggled free, and recoiled from him, defiance in her eyes.

"I am not your wife," she shot back. "That ceremony was not valid."

Her words shocked him, for he had hoped to win her. It was obvious now that she remembered. For a moment he stared at her, then spoke with a hard incisiveness.

"It was valid!"

"You never even considered me your wife, never once acknowledged me. Instead you kept silent, leaving me open to slanderous tongues. Why, it has even gone so far as to get into public print. *The Evening Chronicle* printed something, but I did not see it. You burned the paper!"

Marling set his teeth.

"Yes, I burned it, because I did not want you to get lies from a newspaper. I preferred to have you learn the truth from me."

"Learn the truth from you!" she flashed; then went on speaking rapidly. "Perhaps you really had no intention of letting me know. Not long ago you intimated it when you told me about the man who married a young girl and never acknowledged her. The story has haunted me. To-day I realized it was my own story. It was base, cowardly of you to keep silent! I—I almost despise you! How do I know," she burst out, "but that you forced me through a fake marriage?"

At this, Marling was stunned.

"Fake marriage!" he gnashed out. "Clematis! I may seem ignoble in your eyes, but God knows I am *honorable!*"

For an instant she stood there shivering, then lifting her eyes suddenly she confronted him.

"Tell me," she cried, "tell me the truth, everything! I want to know! How did you find me? *Did you buy me?*"

There was a dead stillness. It was a crucial moment, a moment which meant all or nothing. She had put the question and he must answer. To Clematis the suspense was torture. She tore the orchids from her breast, letting the delicate petals flutter to the floor, but her eyes never left Marling's face. As she looked at him, Clematis thought he had never seemed more rugged, more potently masculine. Meeting her gaze, Marling felt the muscles in his face twitch and, once more, he reached up and brushed back the shock of hair that lined his fore-



"TELL ME," SHE CRIED, "TELL ME THE TRUTH,
EVERYTHING!"



head like a black streak; then passed his hand over his eyes, as if to shut out something hideous.

"No!"

When Clematis heard it she nearly collapsed for joy. The little word proved almost too much for her, she dropped upon her knees and buried her face, sobbing in her arms.

"If," she said, when with supreme effort she had recovered herself, having risen to her feet and stood supporting herself against a book cabinet, "if I—I thought you had done that, I—I should have murdered you. No, no," she added hastily, laughing, almost in a state of hysteria, "I—I wouldn't I—I think I should just have gone away to where the Soul-Flower blooms eternally and to the end of things. Did you take me from my father because of the great wrong he did? Wh-what was it? I—I have forgotten. What did he do?"

"He would have murdered you; worse than that, he would—well he would have renounced you to a living death. He killed your mother."

Clematis was white now as a marble statue.

"Not deliberately?"

"No. He broke her heart."

"Tell me about my mother," she pleaded.

"You don't remember her?"

"No, I barely recall her, and when I do, it is always so vague, so far away. Did you know her?"

"Yes, quite well. The two families, hers and mine, were close, devoted friends. She was the beautiful Althea Delmar and when she married your father, it was said she had done well. I was at the wedding."

Clematis looked up at him in a degree of astonishment. Strange he had never told her this before.

"You were at my mother's wedding?" she breathed. "I didn't know."

"I was a small child then, a mere boy of ten," Marling said. "She was beautiful, Clematis, and you are very like her except that your features are a bit more delicately chiselled. Thank God," he added sharply, "you don't in the least resemble your father, Arthur Vallerie. Your mother might have done brilliantly, had the chance to marry Warner Kent, the world's money king, but instead she married your father, who, when not under the influence of drug was mad, brutally mad, and he would commit any crime to get money with which to buy the sickening, maudlin stuff!"

"He deplores the life he's led, the things he's done," pursued Clematis. "He is a helpless paralytic now living in Wilburton with one Hermann Vlotsky, a shoemaker, and he wants me, needs me so in his great affliction. Oh, he repents, deeply repents, that terrible wrong and he—he wants my forgiveness. I—I think I will go to see him before it is too late, and ——"

"No, you won't," cut in Marling fiercely. "You will do nothing of the sort. Men of his kind never change, never repent. If I've got anything to do with it, you shall not go."

"Oh, but he is my father and he is so miserable," she insisted, "and he longs so to see me once, just once to beg forgiveness. As his daughter, I think I should go, ought to forgive him. At least I owe him that."

The lines in Marling's face creased hard.

"You owe him nothing," he said. "He never cared for

you. He deserves his retribution. He doesn't need your pity; doesn't want your forgiveness, furthermore isn't entitled to it. For God's sake, Clematis, don't go!"

Oh, the earnestness, the appeal in his eyes and in his voice! Clematis could hardly withstand his power of entreaty.

"I—I really have no claim on you now," she faltered quiveringly.

"No, not if you regard that ceremony invalid," he returned quietly. "It was a legal marriage, the service was read by the Reverend Archibald Hunt in the library, but then you were too young to know, too ill to understand. I married you because I wanted the right to care for you, and no one could dare question that right. I did what I thought was honorable. But now," he bitterly, "since you are a woman I will not stand in the way of your happiness. If you care for Anthony or there is another, you are at liberty to marry the man you love."

There was no response from Clematis. She half turned away from him, with head bent, and hands clasped in a strained movement before her. She could not look at Marling, for she felt terribly ashamed for having doubted him. Now that she was sure of his honor in regard to herself, she did not want to be renounced. The thought that he would surrender her without the shadow of a pang, hurt her acutely.

Standing there white and worn, a tired look in his eyes, his pale sensitive face etched against the back-ground of the room like a pure cameo, he saw that she was struggling bravely to keep back the tears.

"Clematis," he said, "you are tired, painfully upset, and you ought to go to bed."

She did not answer for the sob in her throat, did not even glance at him, but moved slowly, very slowly, in the direction of the door. He reached it first and stood there waiting, holding it open for her. When she gained the threshold, she hesitated. She felt that she had been unjust, and she wanted his forgiveness, yearned for the old place in his friendship.

"Good-night, Clematis," he said.

"Good-night," she breathed, and there was a break in her voice. She still did not look at him. He wondered why she lingered. Maybe she still doubted.

"Is there doubt, more suspicion?" he asked finally.

"No," very faintly.

"Are you certain about everything now? Is it all clear, perfectly clear?"

"Yes."

"Then don't let it distress you," he admonished gently. "I alone am to blame. A little while ago when I told you about a man who made a girl his wife and never acknowledged her, you said you would hate that man. Do you hate me?"

He held his breath in fearful suspense. Low as it was, he caught the little word, "N-o," and it thrilled him with an over-powering, maddening ecstasy.

"God knows," he said hoarsely, "I wish you would forgive, at least try to forget."

"No, I—I can't unless you ——" and her voice broke absolutely. Then she swayed forward and would have dropped to the floor, but he caught her in his arms and held her close. The physical contact proved too much,

conquering them both. Clematis, with her face hidden on his breast and sobbing softly, let her arms steal up and tighten about his neck, while he bent down and buried his devouring eyes in her beautiful hair, nearly crushing her against him. "I—I can't unless you forget," she finished brokenly. His cheek still lay against her soft wonderful hair, and if he chose he might have kissed her, but he dared not; as yet it was not his right.

"I have forgotten," he said hoarsely, and Clematis thrilled under the deep vibrant tones of his voice.

"And so have I," she murmured. She looked up at him shyly, the glow of divinity in her eyes.

"Good-night," she said softly.

"Good-night, Clematis," he answered, unsteadily, fighting back the mad desire to detain her. He watched her glide from the room like the fading of some beautiful vision, the passing whiff of delicious fragrance.

When she was gone, he dropped into the deep embrace of his cushioned fauteuil, gripped hard the arms, closed his eyes wearily and inclined his head against the soft cushioned back to find dreams shattered, for sleep had taken wing like some swift flying swallow.

And she, standing alone in her beautiful room, smiled happily. She was a new Clematis. An hour ago, she had been in the depths of shadows, now she gloried in the light of stars. After a moment she moved over to her dressing-table and began to unfasten her gown. She missed her maid's deft fingers. She had told Marietta not to sit up for her; that if she wished she might have the evening. When she managed to undo the last hook and draw off her sleeves, something white and fluttering wafted downward. Instantly she remembered the check

Marling had given her and her face flushed, burned as if scorched by a flame. Stooping, she picked up the slip of paper, mechanically sat down, and wrote her name across the back of it, then finished undressing. When she had braided her hair and slipped into her *robe de nuit* there was a gentle knock at the door and a moment later, Alicia Gebhard, in full evening dress, came into the room.

"What, not in bed yet?" she greeted smilingly. "I suppose you waited up for Douglas."

Clematis colored and laughed lightly.

"Yes, I—I waited for him," she stammered. "Did you have a pleasant evening?"

"No, I didn't. Horace was in a horrid mood. Lately he has become an awful grouch. He left long before the evening was over, pleading an important engagement, and as yet he has not come home. I have been back more than half an hour and in desperation. Jane always waits for me, no matter how late. She never failed before to-night."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have been trying all this time to unfasten your gown?" queried Clematis sympathetically.

"Yes. I feared I should have to go to bed with my clothes on and was simply in despair, when I thought of you and wondered if you were asleep. Believe me, I didn't want to disturb you, but there was scarcely an alternative. I felt I must either sit up all night, go to bed fully dressed, or run the risk of finding you dreaming, and so here I am to beg pity of you and implore freedom." They both laughed.

"Do let me liberate you," pleaded Clematis.

"How good of you," Alicia explained gratefully. "You

are always kind, ever ready to do a person a favor. Oh, Clematis," she burst out, "I have been wicked, so wicked toward you, and I am so sorry. Oh, you don't know how sorry! We say and do much that we later deplore. I scorn to shift blame on other persons, but Horace Gebhard is at the bottom of it all. His profanity and shameful misconduct have constantly mortified and distressed me till I have become cynical and embittered. Won't you forgive and forget and let us be friends?"

Clematis was a little surprised that Alicia should desire her friendship. Alicia had never been over-fond of her; in fact, had never put herself out to be nice to her, and for a moment she stood doubtful, but when she saw tears glistening in the woman's eyes, the evidence of sincerity, she was ready to forgive and forget all in the hand-clasp. Then, too, there was Marling; for his sake they should be friends.

"I am so glad, so glad, Alicia!" she exclaimed fervently.

"You will forgive?" faltered the other, tears still jewelizing her lashes.

"Of course I will. With all my heart."

"And you will receive with me on tomorrow evening at my party?"

"Indeed I will. I shall be charmed. But first I must marry Carl Anthony," laughed Clematis. The woman eyed her for a moment, laughed and then burst out emphatically: "No, I wouldn't have you marry him, the brute!"

"But you said ——"

"Oh, don't mind what I said."

"I won't."

"Oh, you darling!" cried Alicia vehemently. "You are an angel," and she flung her arms around the other's neck and kissed her fondly.

When they finally broke apart, they still smiled through a little veil of mist.

"Now let me put you at liberty," said Clematis, and a moment later they moved over to the dressing-table where with nimble fingers she began to unfasten Alicia's gown, clipping tiny threads that confined jeweled pendants.

"Thank you," breathed Alicia when Clematis had done and she felt herself free and easy. Then, as she inadvertently looked down, she suddenly caught sight of Marling's check on the dressing-table and her eyes glistened.

"Oh," she interjected, "what's this? A check from Douglas for ten thousand. He's good, Clematis," she said feelingly, holding the white slip in her fingers.

"Yes, he is generous," acquiesced Clematis. There was a slight pause in which Alicia gazed intently into space for a moment then shifted her eyes to Clematis and regarded her earnestly.

"Do you know," she said, "he is your husband?"

"I know," Clematis answered, a delicate flush mounting to cheek and brow.

"He has told you then?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-night."

"Did he tell you everything?"

"Yes, I think quite everything."

"Did he tell you I was there—at the wedding I mean?"

"No, he didn't tell me that. Were you there, Alicia?"

"Yes, and Garland and Thomas. You see ——"

"Thomas?"

"Yes. He was our main chauffeur and mechanic, a simply splendid man. For some reason, I don't remember now, Douglas dismissed him and since then we have never been able to get another just quite like him. I wish we could get him back."

"I wonder where he is now," mused Clematis.

"I don't know," replied Alicia. "I was speaking of him only the other day, and Garland said that he thought he saw him the night when the mob threatened Douglas, but he wasn't sure. You see," she continued, after a moment, "Douglas wished it to be a very quiet wedding, and Horace and I and the two servants were the only witnesses. You don't remember perhaps, but you wore a dainty white dress and carried an arm shower of white peonies and lillies-of-the-valley. Reverend Archibald Hunt officiated, using the Episcopal service. Dear Mr. Hunt! We were so fond of him. He died several years ago. You would have liked him, Clematis."

"Yes, I am sure I would have liked him," murmured Clematis.

"I remember, at the time he was quite interested in you," Alicia continued. "I suppose," she added, "now that you know, you and Douglas will make some sort of announcement." For a moment Clematis gazed silently into space then lifted her eyes pensively.

"I—I don't know. Somehow I—I don't feel as if I am really married to him," Alicia laughed gurglingly.

"Oh, Clematis! You foolish child! Of course you are married to Douglas. It was a legal marriage. If you want to marry Carl Anthony or any other man you will have to get a divorce. You can't marry again unless

you do. If you did you would be a bigamist, and of course you don't want to be a bigamist."

Clematis shuddered, horrified at the suggestion.

"No, of course not," she answered promptly.

"Well, what are you going to do with this check Douglas gave you?" laughed Alicia, holding to view the white slip in slender finger-tips. "I could have sworn you wanted it for a trousseau."

Clematis essayed to smile at this bit of raillery. For the instant she was reminded of her promise to Gebhard. Again she heard his vile threat and felt his grip upon her shoulders; again she looked into his brutal face, cursed with the scar Pappia had inflicted, and she shivered.

"I don't want it for a trousseau," she said in a strained tone. "I—I didn't get it for myself, but ——"

"Not for yourself?"

"No."

For a moment Alicia gazed at her scrutinizingly, then turned away hiding her face. She was certain now that the check was for Gebhard. And his price was ten thousand dollars!

The woman crushed the bit of paper till it crinkled in her slight fingers. She would take things in her own hands. One thing was certain, if he got it, he would get it from her!

"*I know!*" she said tensely between tightened lips, her eyes flashing with a woman's fury in them. "You got it for Horace Gebhard. It's blackmail, hideous blackmail! Doubtless he threatened you with some wicked story. I don't want to know it. You promised to pay him this for his silence. But don't bother, Clematis. I know all

about it. I will speak to him for you and save you the painful necessity of an interview."

"Oh, thank you, Alicia," returned Clematis gratefully, a pensive look in her eyes. "It is good of you. I—I didn't want to meet him."

Alicia laughed little silver ripples.

"No, I won't forget," she answered lightly. There was another ripple of silver laughter from Alicia. Then she kissed Clematis good-night.

CHAPTER X.

It was the day for Alicia's party.

Clematis had slept late. When she waked and finally roused herself to a thinking point, she smiled with supreme exultation. Marling had told her she was free. But now she did not desire freedom, in fact, she was quite willing to let the marriage stand or, if there were to be another ceremony, to become his wife according to his views. She laughed blissfully, and for a moment, lay there with eyes closed and arms about her head, in sweet contentment. When Marietta came in, she rose and dressed, then went down to the little Japanese breakfast room, exquisite in color and design. When she entered, it was empty, the rest of the family having breakfasted sometime before. It was good to live, she thought; good to be well and happy. There was nothing so health-giving as happiness. Humming an aria from Faust she emerged from the breakfast room into the hall-way there to discover Marling in his long fur coat, drawing on his gloves, ready to depart for his down town office.

"Good-morning, Clematis," he greeted.

"Good-morning," she answered. Then, when she neared him, he noted how beautiful she was; the glow in her eyes, the color in her cheeks, the happy buoyancy of youth.

"You are radiant," he commented.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"It was very late you know when we said good-night. You slept well, didn't you?"

"No." In truth, he had not slept at all, did not even go to bed, but when she left him alone in his study, he switched off the light, and, clad in his warm dressing-gown, smoked until the stars went out.

"Come along with me for a sail over the snow," he said. "Hurry and get on your things. I will give you an airing before I go to the office."

"Glorious!" she exclaimed. "I always love to sail with you in your motor sleigh!" and she darted away to reappear five minutes later in cap, veil and beautiful musquash.

"I didn't keep you long?" she smiled.

"No," he answered, and in another moment, they entered the graceful car and went whirling away over the snow. Last night's storm had left the world white and jeweled. There were silver rifts in the clouds and

Patches of blue
Shimmered through
Like opals set in filigree.

It was glorious, simply exhilarating. Clematis drank in eagerly the delicious cool air and ever and anon there floated to her fragrant whiffs of spring in the embryo.

"Alicia tells me you and she are quite good friends now," observed Marling, when they had sailed for a long distance in the park, all white and smooth, the trees, in the gentle wind, swaying lightly, glistening snow pendants.

"Yes," she acquiesced, "she and I are good friends

now. Last night we buried the past and forgot and forgave everything."

"I am glad," said Marling earnestly. "That scoundrel, Gebhard, has made her life intolerable. Alicia was never that way before she was married. She was always kind and considerate. God!" he added fiercely, "I would give almost anything to get him out of the family."

Clematis made no answer, but sat silent, gazing into space. Then she threw back her veil that the soft cool wind might tingle her cheeks.

"I am glad you did that," said Marling, noting the glow in her eyes.

What was it that stirred her like this? Did she care for him? Instantly he caught from her the radiating spirit of buoyancy and thrill.

"Did what?" she queried, watching arrows of light in the sky widen to silver javelins across the world. Then the sun burst out jewel-like, turning everything into gold.

"You put back your veil," he said. "I don't like to talk to a woman when I can't see her face and look into her eyes. It is exasperating."

She laughed.

"How foolish to be so easily annoyed!"

He, too, laughed from sheer contagion.

"No, it isn't foolish. No man likes to talk to a woman when her face is hidden," he protested. "You are happy, Clematis?"

"Yes. Oh," and she drew a long breath, "it is so beautiful, so wonderful to ——" and she broke off involuntarily.

"Beautiful, wonderful, to do what?"

"To own the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"But you are not at the end of the rainbow," he objected, "you are with me in a motor-sleigh in the snow."

She colored and laughed a bit disconcertedly.

"How literal you are!"

"Well then," he acquiesced, "if you are at the end of the rainbow, I dispute your full possession."

"It belongs to me!" she argued breathlessly. "I won't be cheated out of it."

"No. Half of it is mine," he said. "Shan't we share it, Clematis?" he entreated.

"Shall we?" came softly from her. Marling folded his arms across his breast and sat for a time without speaking, gazing straight before him, watching the snow-clouds flee before the brilliant oriflamme of golden sunshine.

"Clematis," he said finally, "Alicia suggests that you and I announce our marriage, to-night. What do you think about it?"

"I—I don't know," she faltered. "You know best."

"No, you must decide."

"Does it—it matter, really?"

"Yes, it does matter, Clematis, and you know it?" he replied emphatically.

"No, it doesn't. Nothing matters now," she responded hurriedly.

"Then you don't care about having it announced?" he asked almost sternly, regarding her intently.

"I—I—don't care about anything except—except —"

Marling did not press her, but let his eyes rest upon her questioningly for an instant, then, without a word turned

and caught hold of his steering wheel, and in another moment they whisked away like the wind.

When they arrived at Milborne Place Marling did not get out, but turned bent quietly toward her and kissed her, pressing his own to the warm petals of her lips. Clematis was startled, yet she had more than half suspected the truth. She was certain of it now and she felt the blood in her body warm and thrill under the firm pressure of his mouth on hers. In the complete intoxication, Marling slipped his hand into her muff and caught and imprisoned one of hers while she bowed her head on his shoulder, smothering her face against his great fur coat. Then Clematis slipped from him, darted from the sleigh, up the marble steps, and into the house, with a song in her heart. At the foot of the stairs she encountered Horace Gebhard.

"You promised to get that money for me," he ground out.

Clematis met his eyes fearlessly.

"I did."

"What in hell did you do with it?" he demanded savagely.

"I gave it to Alicia."

"You gave it to Alicia?"

"Yes."

"Why in the devil did you give it to her?"

"Because—I—I didn't want to meet you," she answered courageously.

Gebhard stared angrily and his teeth chattered. "You little devil!" he hissed, then he was gone. She laughed softly, as she leaned against the newel post in a sort of delicious bewilderment. To-day she was not going to let

anything interfere with her happiness, not even Horace Gebhard. Her one thought was of Marling. In the sleigh, she had scarcely responded to his kiss, the clasp of his fingers, but now, if he cared, she would give everything, her veritable self. But what if he did not care? she argued suddenly. What if his kiss, his hand-clasp, were just little friendly caresses?

After a time she lifted her head and laughed a little, a catch in her throat. It was foolish to make oneself miserable, and perhaps all for nothing. Softly humming, she ran lightly up the steps to her own room and when she had divested herself of her motor garb, went in search of Alicia, who was in the library arranging flowers and giving directions.

"Good-morning, Clematis," she greeted, looking up from a cluster of exquisite buds she was holding. "Are you just from the breakfast-table?"

"No, indeed," laughed Clematis, "I have been for a glorious sleigh ride."

"With Douglas?"

"Yes."

"You enjoyed it?"

"Thoroughly. Oh, it was—was—heavenly!"

It was to be a beautiful party, an evening among the gods. The entire lower floor portrayed Olympus and the deities. On the second floor was the foyer where the cotillion was to be danced later in the evening. It was all aglow with lights, narcissi and great hanging sprays of purple wistaria, the orchestra hidden by palms and ferns and a profusion of the same flower of lavender bells. It was bewildering, Clematis thought, scanning critically even to the beautiful polished floor, reflecting

in its smooth surface tints of emerald and violet. For a moment she stood there noting the effect of color, then turned, smiling dreamily, and went down to Marling's study. At the door she hesitated. Then she opened it softly and entered. Marling was at work, scanning papers, smoke from his cigar curling upward in fragrant violet rings.

"Come in, Clematis," he said, looking up, instantly laying aside the papers and discarding his cigar upon a silver ash-tray.

"You are busy?"

"No, I am not. Come in, I want to talk to you."

She came into the room, moved slowly over to the desk and at once her eyes fell upon the empty vase. When she noted it, she bent her head so that he could not discern her flushed face. He followed her with his eyes, then approached and stood very near her.

"You have neglected me lately," he observed quietly.

"I—I—really haven't meant to, but I—I—"

"I emptied out the dead orchids a day or two ago and ——"

"I—I will refill it now," she interrupted hastily, taking up the vase.

Instantly he laid his hand on hers and detained her.

"No, not now. That can wait! You have always brought me fresh flowers. Why did you fail me these last few days? Did you intend it as an evidence of disfavor?"

She bent her head still lower.

"No, I—I didn't do it because I—I was so miserable."

"You aren't miserable now?"

"No. Come and see how beautiful everything is! Alicia has exquisite taste."

"No, Clematis."

She regarded him intently.

"You don't want to see the decorations? They are beautiful."

"No, I prefer to stay and talk to you. Here, we shall not be disturbed."

She met his gaze pleadingly and there was a pink spot on each cheek.

He looked down into her beautiful eyes, deep, wonderful wells of heavenly blue.

"Clematis, you are a witch, a veritable witch."

She laughed and lowered her eyes.

"Am I?"

"Yes. Do you know what a witch is?"

"Of course. A woman supposed to have intercourse with evil spirits. Is it possible I am like that?"

He laughed.

"No, you are not like that," he said. "You are wrong. A witch is a woman who completely enthralls a man and awakens his heart to the meaning of love . . . Love," he continued musingly, "is strange, wonderful, all-conquering. It steals in so subtly, and takes possession without authority! Clematis," he burst out genially, "come show me the wonders Alicia has wrought. I want to see them."

She laughed.

"Capricious!" she exclaimed, and met his eyes for an instant, then turned and led the way, piloting him from room to room, revealing beauty and magic transformation. They lingered for a moment in Cupid's bower amid bells,

hearts and roses, then passed on to the temple of Jupiter and Dodona Grove.

"Oracles!" laughed Marling, noting the picturesqueness of ensemble, trees, rocks, fountain, grotto; the purple play of shadows and warm shimmer of light as of the after-glow at sunset.

"Isn't it wonderful?" queried Clematis, resting her elbows upon one of the low marble columns and gazing wistfully into space, the light of dreams in her eyes.

"Yes," answered Marling, leaning against the column opposite and looking across at her, an isle of greenest moss between them. "Who is to preside here, as priestess?"

"Mrs. Alfred Penrose."

"She is a charming bit of femininity."

"Yes. Mrs. Penrose has a wonderful knowledge of palmistry and fortune-telling."

"A valuable asset in time of need," he observed pleasantly. "I suppose," he added, "this will be a favorite coigne for many to-night. You wouldn't let me share the pot of gold to-day. May I share it now?"

She colored delicately and bent her head a little, keeping her eyes upon the sparkling waters, then gave a long breath before she murmured:

"Perhaps."

The vibrant tones of her voice thrilled him.

"What is that pot of gold? Is it ——"

"Happiness."

"And happiness?"

She did not answer.

"Love," he finished in low modulation. "Ah, Clematis,

shall you seek the oracle to-night to know about the man you love?"

The thrill in his voice almost unsteadied her and she dared not trust herself to glance up, for she knew well she could not withstand the glow in his eyes.

"I—I don't believe in ——"

"You don't believe in love?"

"Yes, but not in oracles. I have ceased to have faith in fortune-telling and such things."

He spoke with a happy air of confidence.

"I know why you don't believe in them now," he said.

She glanced across at him questioningly.

"Because— Shall I say it?"

He waited, not shifting his gaze from hers.

"Y-yes. Because what?"

"You are a married woman. You are *my* wife!"

She was nearly swept beyond herself. Tears glistened in her eyes. She tightened her interlaced fingers and bowed her cheek upon them. The man opposite regarded her intently for a moment, then reached her quickly, caught her hands and drew her toward him till her arms fell softly about his neck. She uttered a low sob, then let her head drop upon his breast. After a moment, he lifted her head from his shoulder and kissed her, crushing his lips on hers. How warm they were!

"Clematis, I love you!" he said fiercely, holding her close almost roughly in his arms, his lips still on hers. "For years I have waited for this hour. Good God! Clematis, I love you and I want you. Can't you care?" he cried. "Can't you care?"

She looked up at him, her head still against his shoulder, and laughed softly.

"How fierce you are!" she murmured. "I—I wonder if—if I must be afraid of you?"

"Clematis, my darling, answer me," he pleaded hoarsely.

"Yes, I love you," she breathed tensely. "Oh, Douglas, you don't know how I love you. You can't imagine what you have been, what you are to me. You have ever been my ideal, a man above other men!"

The shadows played in purple and violet; the lights shimmered softly rose and gold; the fountain murmured gurglingly, shooting up argent spray. After a time they walked slowly up and down the green aisle between the columns. When they reached the fountain they halted and Clematis dipped her fingers in the pure crystal water.

"How clear it is!" she mused.

"Ah, but not as pure as your soul," he answered earnestly. He plucked a white flower, jeweled it with crystal drops and fastened it in her hair. She laughed, happy as a naiad.

"Somehow," she said, "I can't believe I—I am your wife. I feel there *ought* to be another ceremony."

He smiled and laid his cheek on hers.

"If you feel that way about it, dearest," he said, fondly stroking her hair, "we will have a dozen if you desire, but you must decide."

"No, no, I want it to be as you wish," she answered, curling her arms around his neck and clinging to him as if she would never let him go.

"Oh, Douglas, I love you, I love you!" she burst out breathlessly.

"Nothing in this wide, wide world could make me hate

you except that one thing, that question of barter and I know you wouldn't do anything wicked."

"God knows, Clematis," he returned with tenseness of feeling. I have acted toward you honorably always. Come, you are still doubtful and I want to convince you."

"Convince me?"

"Yes, of my honor and the validity of our marriage."

She looked at him with reproach.

"Do you think I need to be convinced?" she queried.

"I do," he replied firmly.

"But I believe, I do believe you," she murmured insistently. He crushed her for a moment against his breast, bent down and kissed her, then finally released her. In silence they went back to the study.

"There," said Marling, when he had taken from his desk a slip of paper and handed it to her, "is proof tangible of our marriage."

She scanned it carefully, then gave it back to him. It was the certificate of their early marriage. He returned it to his desk for safe keeping, then ensconced himself in the inviting embrace of his great leather chair, a smile of infinite joy radiating his features.

Clematis stood by, looking down at him, finally dropping to her knees and resting lightly against him.

"You will forgive my wicked distrust," she implored in distressed tones. He laid his hand upon her head, then fingered the dark tendrils reverently.

"Of course I will, dear heart! Last night I told you I had forgiven and forgotten everything. Ah, my darling, at most, the best of us are sometimes prone to unbelief."

Quietly he laid his hand on her left one and toyed with

the gold band encircling her finger. Gently slipping it off, he held it up to the light, noting the inscription, "D. C." and the date. "Our wedding ring," he said, still holding it in the bright glow of the electrolier for her to decipher the letters, finally replacing it on her finger.

"Ah, Clematis," he exclaimed passionately, "when a man has the woman he loves, he doesn't care about the rest of the world."

"No," she murmured very low. "And when a woman has the man she loves, she doesn't care about the rest of the world."

A moment later slipping from his arms, she freed herself and left the room.

Marling reached for his unfinished cigar on the silver ash-tray, blew fragrant whiffs, watching the blue veil wreath into dream faces, then slowly melt away. He dreamed and smoked till it was time for him to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XI.

DINNER over, Marling returned to his study while Gebhard followed his wife to her room to importune her to turn over to him the money Clematis had secured. Alicia peremptorily refused to give it to him. This put him in a beastly temper.

"Horace! Do calm yourself," she urged. "To-night, at least, you must conceal your anger behind a smiling face."

"Smile!" he growled. "I smile to-night of all nights? Did Barabas smile when he was being crucified?"

"Good heavens, you get on my nerves!" cried his wife. "If you don't quiet yourself you will have to leave this room! I won't have it! You won't get this money until, well, until I have made up my mind to give it to you!" she flashed fiercely.

"In hell, you won't!" he exclaimed furiously. "What have you done with it?"

"Oh, it's safe enough!"

"Why in the deuce don't you turn it over to me now?" he demanded.

The woman, in statuesque beauty, leaned carelessly against her dressing table, then, with deft fingers, began slowly, carelessly to unfasten her gown. At this moment there was a knock at the door and Jane came in to assist her mistress in making her toilette for the party. She glanced impassively from one to the other, then went about her duties.

"I shall wear my gold gown to-night, Jane, the new

creation from Madame Dunne's," directed Alicia in cool, clear tones.

Gebhard stood there in silence, gazing at his wife, who sat before her mirror, adjusting a matchless string of amber drops in her hair. At last, in sheer desperation, he sought Marling in his study to make one final appeal. He found his brother-in-law occupied with *The Evening Chronicle*.

"Douglas!"

"What?"

"Will you give me a minute?"

"I am engaged at present."

Gebhard bit his lip and flushed darkly. Then he swallowed his anger with difficulty, speaking humbly:

"See here, Douglas, I'm in a devil of a fix, as you know, and won't you," he pleaded, "spare me ——?"

Marling dashed aside his paper and lit a cigar.

"What?" he demanded sternly. "Money?"

"Y-yes," stammered the man agonizingly, bracing himself heavily against the center table. "I—I must have ——"

"Well, you'll not get it, not one cent!" cut back Marling, his dark gray eyes flashing.

"But the woman is goading, dogging me and won't wait. If she doesn't get it, she—why she might come here to-night and create a scene. She is liable to do anything. She might do something mad!"

"I am not responsible for her madness," said Marling callously.

"Good Lord! man," ejaculated Gebhard frantically, "I'll do anything; throw the woman over for good, break loose from the old life and live decently. This once, just this once, Douglas," he entreated, "and God knows I'll

not ask you for another cent, not another cent! If you will give it to me this once, I'll go to work and make you proud of me! Besides," he insisted vehemently, "think of Alicia! If the scandal gets out, she can't stand it. Why she will ——"

Marling wheeled suddenly and tossed his cigar toward the fire-place, but, missing the mark, it fell on the hearth-rug. A spark flared up, but he smothered it with his foot.

"Bother Alicia!" he exclaimed. "You never thought about her before! Now you are wretchedly concerned as to her welfare! But don't fret yourself! She is independent, has my protection and is not distressing herself over your affairs. As far as you go, she doesn't care a——a damn about you, and furthermore, after her party to-night, she intends to ——"

The man against the table turned white as death.

"You mean she is going to—to—throw me over?" he gasped faintly. Then, with an effort, he implored: "Give me a chance, another chance! Let me have the money this time and I'll do my best. I swear I will do my best!"

Marling lit a new cigar and watched little rings of vapor curl upward to the ceiling.

"Ah, here you are, both of you!" exclaimed Alicia sweetly, sweeping into the room, at that moment, radiant and bewitching in a gorgeous gown of gold, shimmering in amber drops. Strings of the same jewels flashed about her throat and in her hair. She carried an arm shower of buttercups and daffodils and turned slowly for inspection.

"How do you like me?" she asked Douglas, cheeks flushed and lips smiling.

Her brother's eyes had already spoken volumes.

"You are superb," he said after a moment, still scrutinizing her. "I never saw you look handsomer."

"Thank you," she murmured, then went up to him, curling her free arm around his neck and kissed him.

"And what have you to say, Horace?" she queried, later turning to her husband.

"Everyone to-night will say you are the most beautiful woman in Christian," he answered emotionally.

"Flatterer!" she laughed gaily.

"I am not palavering. I mean it. From my soul I do."

She laughed again little silver ripples.

"Then come and let me show you the wonders I have wrought," she importuned graciously.

"You know you possess artistic temperament."

He consented meekly, indeed, with obvious gallantry, and they went out together.

"You are not going to throw me over, are you, Alicia?" he pleaded, when they were alone in the bower of love and enchantment.

"We are not talking divorce," she said banteringly. "We are discussing decorations."

CHAPTER XII.

"A PENNY for your thoughts."

Suddenly aroused, Marling glanced up quickly and beheld a vision of loveliness, Clematis all in white; her gown shot with myriads of tiny silver drops; her arms filled to overflowing with flowers that trailed against her gown. She seemed a debutante about to launch her boat on the restless tide of an ever capricious social sea, or a bride led to the altar, where girlhood and womanhood meet then bid farewell forever.

Standing there in the door-way, her cheeks the delicate blush of roses; her eyes, jewel-like with wondrous and mysterious sparkle, she smiled, then came into the room and laid her flowers upon the center table. Looking down at her, Marling's eyes burned with infinite pride and love.

"Whence come thee, O Flora?" he asked with genial badinage.

"From the garden of the Hesperides," answered she with equal raillery. "Aren't my flowers lovely? Happy, radiant companions of Proserpine!"

"Where did you get them?"

"Demeter gave them to me."

"Ah, she was generous!"

"Generous, indeed!"

"Did she give you precious golden apples? And shall you run a race with Atalanta?"

The two laughed at their own dalliance.

"Well, what are you going to do with the deities?" he asked curiously.

"I am going to transform your study into a veritable garden of Armida," she responded, laughingly. Coming around the table, he stood beside her and said earnestly:

"And my fair Armida is not a siren but a woman whom I ——"

"Do help me with the flowers," she interrupted hurriedly, dropping a cluster of hyacinths and narcissus.

"Gladly, sweetheart; what will you have me do?"

"Fill the vases with water and I will do the rest."

Marling proceeded to carry out her instructions. He was in a hilarious mood to-night. It seemed that he and Clematis were boy and girl together playing at games in a sunny meadow. He managed capitally for a time, then while she was holding a vase for him to fill, he quite accidentally spilled a little water on her hands.

"There! See what you have done!" she exclaimed.

Instantly he caught her hands and held her before him.

"I am still an awkward boy," he remarked exuberantly.

"Clematis, do you remember the evening of your debut? You wore a gown then so like the one you are wearing to-night."

"And do you remember how happy you made me that evening?" she murmured.

"Ah, dearest, and you were happy?"

"Oh, so happy!"

"My darling is lovely to-night!" he said proudly.

"Oh, we are forgetting the flowers!"

"Oh, are we? That is a fact!"

Clematis filled the vases with flowers and placed them

to advantage on book shelf and cabinet. When she had done, she and Marling stood hand in hand, her slight fingers curling softly about his, and noted the wonderful transformation.

"And now, dearest, may I know why you have done this?" he inquired. She laughed in low musical tones.

"I—I did it because—because my heart goes out to you who has never known a wife. Everything in God's creation unmated is to be pitied. It is in sweet companionship that bird and beast, man and woman, find surest happiness. God meant it to be so. There is no other way but God and love."

"Ah, Clematis," he breathed, "no other way but love." Then with sudden fierceness catching her in his arms, he held her tightly imprisoned.

"Clematis, you are my wife! My wife!" he said hoarsely.

"That child marriage," she said hurriedly, "let's not consider it. I will marry you according to your views!"

"You will?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Any time you desire."

"Now?"

She colored deeply, lowered her eyes and drew a long breath.

"Y-e-s."

"What about the world and conventions?" he asked quickly.

"Bah!" she exclaimed scornfully, "the world and conventions, its mockery, and shallow civilization! Ours

will be a marriage more solemn, more sacred, more enduring. It will be one after God's own way!"

"Then we will wed as the robins mate," he interpolated with joyful eagerness; "as stars merge their wondrous light one within the other. When robins mate, there is no third to bind them one to the other and warble, 'Mr. Robin, wilt thou have Miss Robin for thy wedded wife? Miss Robin, wilt thou have Mr. Robin for thy wedded husband?' When stars unite in a double planet, there is no other to blend their glorious light in one golden effulgence. This is marriage! Ah, Clematis," he continued with awesome solemnity, taking her hand in his, "as God sees me, I, Douglas, take you, Clematis, for my wedded wife; to acknowledge you as such before the world, and forsaking all others, cleave only unto you to love, honor and cherish unto death."

"As God sees me," vowed Clematis in low sweet gravity, "I Clematis, take you, Douglas, for my wedded husband; to acknowledge you as such before the world and forsaking all others, cleave unto you, to love, honor and cherish unto death."

In the deep solemn hush too sacred for words, they stood motionless, reverential.

"My wife," he breathed, and he caught her to him, held her close and kissed her. "Do you know you are *that* to me?"

"*I know*," she answered in low tones. "I have always wanted to be *your* wife.

He laughed from sheer happiness.

"I am young to-night," he said.

"I wonder if anyone's come!" she exclaimed abruptly, glancing at the clock.

"Let them come, the whole world, if they but leave us two, alone together."

* * * * *

The Marling residence in Milborne Place was the scene of brilliancy and rare beauty. Music floated from the foyer in enticing strains, suggestive of Tepsichorean and Cytheran dreams. Men were immaculate in smart evening attire and women bewitching in gorgeous gowns and jewels. At eleven o'clock the cotillion would begin for which Alicia had provided unique and expensive favors, miniature golden chariots, owls jewelled eyed, silver bows and arrows, diamond hearts pierced by tiny shafts, shimmering golden nets and butterflies, jeweled flutes and lyres singing of Pan and Apollo. It was in the Demeter garden, with its wealth of grain and flora beneath a gigantic cornucopia, overflowing with fruits and flowers, that Gebhard and Alicia, Marling and Clematis welcomed the guests. Alicia was happy and charmingly radiant as she noted her husband's geniality; if he kept it up the entire evening, he would make his wife's party the talk of the town!

For a while the temple and grove were crowded. Men and women eager to have palms read and fortunes told. When, at last, all trailed away in the direction of the foyer, satisfied as to a "happy future," the cotillion was in full swing. Truly joy was unconfined.

"Oh, Clematis, dear, I am so glad, so glad!" exclaimed Sylvia Sterling as she and Jack Holland, flushed from a round of dancing, came up and made a part of the group. "I really can't get over it," she gurgled sweetly.

"Sort of cold plunge that hits the nerves," laughed Holland.

"Rather," answered Sylvia. "I do hope, dear, you will be happy always."

"Thank you, Sylvia," returned Clematis with sweet graciousness.

"It won't be my fault if she isn't happy," said Marling promptly.

"No, I can safely predict that," smilingly interposed Alicia, circling an arm about Clematis. "Douglas has a way of spoiling. I am sure he will make an indulgent husband."

"He's a generous fellow," said Gebhard genially.

So they laughed and chatted in pleasant raillery while dancers floated by in response to intoxicating strains.

Suddenly there was a ripple of commotion and a craning of necks. Someone was entering the foyer; a woman, willowy and graceful, wearing a low-cut gown of black with an over-dress of jetted spangles that trailed like black sea-foam shooting iridescence. She was queenly as any goddess; her head, its wealth of glorious hair rippling and gleaming like waves of burnished gold was beautifully poised on a faultless pair of shoulders white and smooth as uncarved ivory. She came with regal step, her deep shadowy eyes gazing straight before her, expressive of bored nonchalance. She was accompanied by a small boy who walked in a manly way beside her and held her hand, spirit and courage in his eyes not unlike his mother's. When the two edged their way through, crossed the shining polished floor and stood in full view of all, there was an astonished flutter, then a sudden hush. Music ceased; dancers stood motionless, gazing breathlessly and there were smothered exclamations, "Beautiful!" "Stunning!" "Superb!" Ah, Pappia Ardeth was superb!

With a quick movement, the boy let go his mother's hand and made a dash for Gebhard, and in another moment, Pappia approached, smiling graciously, as if in coming she had done quite the proper thing.

"How do you do, Horace?" she said, in tones of her old-time witchery. "You seem quite disturbed," and she laughed musically.

"How do you do, Pina? I confess I—I am a little startled," he answered, regaining with tremendous difficulty his usual bravado. When he first espied them, woman and child, he became white and rigid; his hands gripped hard as with automatic tension, and freezing drops oozed out on face and limb.

"Oh, dad, aren't you going to speak to me?" cried the boy, fondling his knees. "Aren't you glad we've come? Oh, mother, do look at the flowers up here too!" he exclaimed with infantile exuberance. "They are everywhere and cute little naked boys with wings and arrows and other big boys and girls with no clothes on, 'cept things on their heads and in their hands. They ought to be ashamed—and——"

A general titter drowned the rest of the sentence. The child spoke in stentorian innocence.

"They are little Cupids, gods and goddesses made of marble," whispered Pappia. "You must not talk so loud and so freely."

"Dad's giving the most beautifulest party and he didn't ask us, but I'm glad we came anyhow. You do want us, dad, now don't you?" he queried eagerly, entreasy in his eyes. The man looked down at him, still smiling light bravado.

"You little devil!" he said and laughed mawkishly.

"O-h, dad!" whimpered the child, pursing his sweet red lips.

"Come here, Jean," said his mother gently.

"Dad must be ill 'cause he isn't glad to see us."

"Hush, dear!"

But the little fellow refused to obey his mother.

"Kiss me, dad, and take me in your arms like you used to do," he begged in a quivering voice. The boy's yearning fondness for the man was pathetic in the extreme.

"Kiss him, Horace!" said the woman, the look of triumph in her eyes. "He is *your* son!"

Gebhard waited a moment, debating, his eyes comprehending the brilliant company of assembled guests, then in a spirit of brazen defiance caught up the child in his arms and kissed him with a parent's fond tenderness, later putting him down with a final caress.

Jean laughed in childish delight.

Poor Alicia! Tearless and breathing little inaudible gasps, she stood there voiceless, motionless like a stricken Niobe. She gazed from her husband to the woman and from the woman back to Gebhard, finally letting her eyes wander from end to end of the foyer, seeing nothing, everyone about her, silent, staring expectantly. Why had this woman come? Had Horace Gebhard invited her? With nerveless fingers, Alicia toyed unconsciously with the rope of jewels about her throat; then the gold cord broke and tiny amber drops went shimmering in every direction like scintillant splashes of yellow sunshine.

"Why did you ask her here, this woman," she demanded of Gebhard with sudden fierceness.

He met her gaze in silent, brutal effrontery.

"He did not ask me," said Pappia with quiet gracious-

ness. "I came of my own free will and desire and—and because I—I love him."

In the silence that ensued, there was an exchange of furtive glances, a significant lifting of eye-brows. People began to leave at once, making their way out rapidly.

"Horace Gebhard is a—a brute," said one woman fiercely. Her escort laughed.

"Why don't you call a spade a spade?" he queried cynically. "He's the devil. I wonder now," he commented musingly, "if Alicia's going to throw him over." "Of course she will," answered the other promptly. "Alicia is not the woman to stand for a man's wilful and open viciousness."

"Most women condone that sort of thing," he ventured carelessly.

"Most women are fools!" said the woman vehemently.

Ah, the ending of Alicia's party!

Gebhard had said if he *had* anything to do with it, he would make it the talk of the town. He *had* made it the talk of the town! To-morrow it would be the chief topic, the sensational gossip of Christian. And this was what hurt Alicia, so acutely. She did not care about Horace Gebhard. If he chose he might go to the ends of the earth with the woman and never enter her life again.

Silence! Nothing but silence! Then there came a clarion crash, a smashing of cut glass. Someone had precipitated a huge bowl filled with drooping sprays of purple wistaria. Probably the accident was due to the hasty exit of a departing guest or to the inadvertence of a stupid servant. Those who heard it were given a poignant tingling of nerves.

"You mean it, Pina? God! You do?" Gebhard asked, drunk with ecstasy.

"Mean what?" she questioned, giving him her beautiful eyes.

"That you care, you love me and ——?"

"Yes," she interrupted quickly. "Oh, Horace," she burst out, "I do love you. I came here to tell you this, not to reproach you for what you have done. Come back to me and our boy, Jean, dear Jean. He needs you; I need you. We both need you, want you, love you. Oh, Horace, Horace, come back to your boy and me. Won't you come? Won't you?" she pleaded, and she ran to him and flung her lovely arms about his neck, hiding her face on his shoulder. He held her in a close embrace, kissing her passionately, then softly stroked her glorious hair. He was sure now he had always loved her. Jean looked up at them, joy depicted in his bright young eyes, and he laughed gleefully.

"You will come, dad?" he said. "You will?"

"Yes, boy, I will come back to you and mother," answered the man vibrantly, still caressing the woman he held and devouring her with his eyes.

"I'm so glad, so glad," cried the child clasping his little hands, joyously. "Mother and I do love you and want you, oh, so very much!"

"My God! You had better get out of this house at once with the boy and the woman, you infamous scoundrel," ordered Marling, severely, turning fiercely to Gebhard, his eyes blazing with rage.

Clematis had never seen him so infuriated. She glanced pathetically at Alicia, for whom she entertained keen sympathy.

Shimmering there in her gown of gold, her flowers of yellow buttercups and daffodils having fallen to the floor amid shining amber drops and toying with the broken gold cord that once held the little jewels in one matchless string of beauty, Alicia was superb in her anger, magnificent as Brunhild flashing waves of scarlet and yellow flame.

"Not yet, Douglas, not yet," she said with sudden fierceness. "There are things I want to say to him before he goes. You are free, free to go with that woman there and the boy. You owe it to them. Poor little fellow! God knows he deserves a better father! Be decent and do your duty by him and try to make him a better man than you have been!"

"But I am already," cut in Jean quickly, enthusiastically. "Mother says so. She says she knows I'm lots gooder than dad was when he was a little boy."

"Go and mend the vases you have broken," continued Alicia witheringly. "Fit in the shattered parts, repair the damage you have done, if you can, and fill them with flowers! But can you? Will you? No!" and she laughed harshly, and he winced under her poignant sarcasm. "No, you will, *can* never do that," she added in tones keen as knife blades. "To-night you said if you had anything to do with my party, you would make it the 'talk of the town.' You *have* made it the talk of the town! But what do you care, Horace Gebhard," she flashed angrily. "You've done everything to humiliate, and we've done everything we could to uplift you, but you are—you—are—"

"Damned hopeless," shot in Marling savagely.

"Yes, hopelessly impossible," continued Alicia heatedly.

"You have had money from Douglas and ungrudgingly, too, but like a fool you squandered it in riotous living."

Pappeia touched her lips with precious jeweled fingers to conceal one of her bewitching smiles.

"You schemed cunningly, even cajoled me into getting it for you, but you haven't got what you wanted this time! You didn't get your blackmail! Here, Clematis, is your check, keep or destroy it as you choose," and she drew forth from a knot of gold chiffon embroidered in amber beads, a white slip and handed it to her. Clematis took it with shaking fingers, tore it into bits, letting them flutter to the floor. She dared not glance at Marling, who gazed at her with startled eyes.

"What check is it?" he demanded sharply.

Clematis flamed scarlet, lifted her eyes, then dropped them.

"It—it—is the—the one you gave me. The—the one ——"

"The one you asked for charity?"

"Y-yes," she faltered miserably, turning away that he might not see the flood of tears in her eyes.

"Clematis! My God! Did you mean to give it to—?"

"To me!" cut in Gebhard triumphantly. "She got it for me!" and he laughed gleefully. "She lied, defrauded it out of you for me! *For me!*"

"My party, oh, my party!" sobbed Alicia, and with an aching catch in her throat, she hastened to her room.

"And why did you do it, Clematis?" Marling asked, regarding her intently. "You told me you wanted it for charity!"

"Oh, Douglas, Douglas," she cried, speaking rapidly, tears in her eyes and in her voice, "I did it to save us

both from—from dishonor. That man there concocted a wicked, dreadful story and said if I did not give him the money he—he would go with it to the newspapers, so I promised him. He threatened, told me he would tell them that I—I you—you ——”

“Never mind the story,” Marling shot out fiercely, and he made a savage dash at Gebhard, who swiftly darted from the foyer and made a wild rush down the staircase, but Marling, in hot pursuit, was too quick for him, seized and jerked him back as he reached the door of the vestibule.

“You devil,” he hissed between tightened lips, holding his victim as in an iron grip, his back against the heavy mahogany doors.

“God, man, you are choking me,” groaned Gebhard, struggling for freedom. There was a swish of skirts and Pappeia Ardeth came hurriedly down the stairs, the boy trotting behind in her wake. When the child saw his father he ran up to him as if to lend assistance.

“Don’t hurt dad, please don’t!” he implored.

“Let Horace go with us. Please, please!” entreated the woman.

Gebhard swallowed hard as if something had gathered in his throat and his eyes bulged frightfully. “I had to have money and I was determined to get it even if I went to the devil! I told Clematis if she did not pay me my price ——”

A terrific blow in the mouth rudely chopped off the sentence and sent him headlong upon the floor, overturning Ganymede, the beautiful marble youth standing guard near the fountain of Iris, crashing it into myriads of white gleaming atoms.

Pappeia screamed.

"Oh, my dad, oh, my dad! Is he dead? Is he dead?" wailed little Jean, dropping down and caressing the fallen man who lay prostrate, with eyes closed, blood oozing from his head.

"Damned blackguard!" breathed Marling. "God! I could kill you," he added hoarsely, planting a foot heavily upon the immaculate bosom of Gebhard's white evening shirt.

Pappeia gave a little cry, then as Garland suddenly appeared with her long fur coat, she slipped into it and buried her face in her fine chinchilla muff.

"Don't be brutal. Don't!" she exclaimed tearfully, after a moment, her voice quivering with real or acquired agitation. The boy, too, burst into a fresh torrent of weeping as if his little heart would break.

Rewarding the perfidious fellow with a kick, Marling wheeled and went back up stairs to Clematis, whom he found cold, white and shivering.

When she was left alone in the foyer, most of the electric lights were hurriedly switched off leaving the long, silent room dim and spectral, fronds of palms and sprays of wistaria casting dark purple shadows along floor and ceiling. She shuddered involuntarily and was bent on instant departure, when she was suddenly confronted by a black, insidious apparition in priest's garb whose keen eyes glared menacingly into hers. The spectre was no other than the glib Father Gleason. He had entered so felinely that in his over cautiousness he inadvertently, in those moments of silence, upset the bowl of wistaria, precipitating it with a crash and completely shattering it. In dismay, he looked about him, then crouched down in the

sheltering foliage of a group of huge palm trees, keeping an eye upon Clematis lest she should escape him.

When she beheld the sombre figure confronting her, she was so startled, she stood motionless unable to breathe a sound. When, however, she did recover she uttered a scream and turned to flee, but he, ever on the alert, closed his hand over one of hers, forcibly detaining her.

"Hush, don't be frightened. I am not going to hurt you," he said in low, quiet tones.

"Why are you here?" she stammered, retreating a step and jerking free her hand.

"I came to warn you against that scoundrel, Marling," he answered hoarsely. "Years ago he played you the devil; if you knew, you would curse him to your last day! You had better get out from under his roof before you find out and go to your old father, who is living with Hermann Vlotsky and helping him to mend shoes. Valerie, poor fellow, is gradually dying, and he needs you, longs to beg forgiveness from you for—well, for—for his unnatural cruelty to you. Go, my daughter, before it is too late, receive his blessing and grant him pardon! It is your duty! You owe it to him. Besides," he hissed, "Marling's a devil, I tell you, and he's not to be trusted. Maybe you will find out some day what I say is true, but if you knew how you came into his life, why, how—how—he got you and how—well—"

Palpably, it was the old suggestion of barter. Could there be something Marling had not told her?

"What do you mean?" she flashed angrily. "Do you insinuate—"

He chuckled.

"I insinuate nothing," he answered shortly. "Remem-

ber, I have warned you!" and, with a disdainful laugh, he left her.

Ere he was gone, the bulbs flashed on, dissipating the shadows and lighting the foyer brilliantly. Clematis was so upset that she leaned heavily against a column entwined with wistaria, unconsciously crushing the delicate flower till it imprinted deep purple stains on her gown.

When Marling came in she was still agitated. He attempted to take her in his arms, but she drew back doubtfully for an instant, then yielded, stealing into his sheltering embrace.

"Are you ill, Clematis?" he inquired anxiously, resting his cheek against hers.

"No, I am nervous and frightened," she faltered.

"What was there to frighten you, dearest?" he persisted in the same anxious tones.

She did not want to tell him that Father Gleason had been there; that he had warned her against him and suggested the same old doubt.

"I—I am nervous and worried because I deceived you when I—I asked you for money for charity," she responded miserably. "Oh, Douglas, Douglas," she burst out, "are you angry? Will you ever trust me again? Can you ever forgive? There was no other way. I—I did it to save us both and to —"

Marling crushed her against him and bent down and quieted her with his lips on hers.

"My darling," he exclaimed huskily, "there is nothing to forgive. I should have done just as you did, perhaps had I been in your place, only you might have trusted me a little. But, no matter, don't be distressed. Ah, my wife, I trust you and I love you," he added fervently.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN Horace Gebhard departed with the woman and the boy, he went to live with them at Father Gleason's, No. 10 Phryne Street. Alicia filed suit for divorce and when she obtained her decree, sailed a fortnight later for Sorrento to visit a very dear friend who owned a picturesque villa in that Italian paradise. Everyone felt keenly for her and whenever the incident of the party was broached, it was discussed regretfully and in scrupulous undertone.

"It was extremely unfortunate,—outrageous the way that horrid woman came and broke up the party that night," commented Sylvia Sterling, when she called one morning and she and Clematis were alone in Marling's study.

"Most distressing," assented Clematis, leaning forward and resting her arms along the mahogany table. "My heart aches for her."

"You are fond of her?"

"Quite fond of her."

"Oh, Clematis, dear, do forgive me for the dreadful things I said to you not long ago. It was so mean of me, so wicked and I am so sorry about it!"

Clematis laughed blissfully.

"Don't distress yourself, dear," she said genuinely, "I have forgiven everything! Why, I am too happy to cherish ill-will toward anybody. Sylvia, dear, you should do as I have done. You and Jack Holland should get married. You and he have been in love for ages and are wasting loads of time."

"Yes, soaring among the clouds. Now we —"

"Ah, but it's delicious, heavenly to drift among the clouds," breathed Clematis.

They both laughed ecstatically.

"Now," continued Miss Sterling, blushing prettily, "Jack and I have descended to earth and we are—are—"

"Really going to be married?"

"No. We *are* married!"

Clematis stared at her friend in surprise, reproach in her eyes.

"Sylvia! When did it happen? You didn't let me know a thing about it."

"I meant to," said Sylvia, "but it was sudden, as Jack says, on the spur of the moment. He believes in doing things like that, you know. When he puts his mind to a thing he is quite emphatic."

"When were you married?"

"Last night after the theatre," recounted Sylvia, drawing a long breath. "Jack and I had been to see 'Marble Faun,' and when we came out after the play, he proposed that we get married. My main reason for dropping in to see you this morning was to tell you about it. I wanted you to know it from me. Jack is very busy just now and we can't get away for very long, so we shall take a short bridal trip. We sail this afternoon for the Bermudas. It's joy to be married, Clematis!"

"And—and was there a clergyman?" Clematis asked wonderingly.

"Yes, of course!"

"Oh," murmured Clematis below her breath. Miss Sterling smiled indulgently across at her.

"Jack and I went at once to Dr. Witherspoon's, who

read the service. It was all done before we knew. How glad I am it's over!"

"I, too, am glad, Sylvia, dear. I wish you all the happiness in the world!"

The two laughed and chatted, and Sylvia finally departed.

In the days of bliss that ensued, Clematis rarely recurred to those harrowing moments of doubt and question of barter. She scarcely thought of Gebhard, Pappeia and Father Gleason, yet, in a strange sort of way they and the old obsession pursued her subconsciously. One night she was fatefully reminded of them in a dream. She awoke startled, shivering and sobbing. Her distress quickly aroused Marling.

"What is it, dear heart?" he asked anxiously, immediately possessing one of her hands.

"Oh, I—I've had a frightful dream!" she exclaimed. "It was horrible, horrible! I—I thought I—I was sold?"

"Hush, Clematis. You have no reason to think such things. Forget you've had a bad dream. Dreams are nothing but dreams."

"But I—I can't forget," she half-sobbed, and narrated her dream in detail. She dreamed she was sold to Marling and there, confronting her, stood Horace Gebhard, Pappeia Ardeth and Father Gleason, who grinned in hideous satisfaction. A man, horribly bent and emaciated, with snow-white hair, deep sunken eyes and skin lined and sallow as crinkled yellow parchment, accepted the money from Marling, glared at her exultantly for a moment, then departed.

But her dream did not end there. It shifted to Vlot-sky's shoe shop in Wilburton where, again, she stood in

the presence of the same repulsive man, with snow-white hair, deep sunken eyes and sallow wrinkled face, at work, mending shoes! When he looked up and recognized her, he threw aside his shoes, uttered a plaintive cry and held out his arms beseeching forgiveness. When she refused, he burst into a flood of tears, then fell forward upon a pile of dilapidated shoes, life gone out of his wicked, wretched body.

"Oh, I—I can't forget," she repeated miserably. "It seemed so real, so *terribly real*! Tell me the truth!" she cried.

"You are upset, Clematis," he remonstrated. "Don't work yourself into a fever because you have had a bad dream." Then he added, tenderly caressing her, "Dearest, don't think of it any more! Go to sleep!"

She lay there sobbing. She was not satisfied.

"You do love me, Douglas?" she said, sitting on the arm of his chair after breakfast next morning when they were alone in the library. As she put the question, her eyes gazed searchingly into his. He met her gaze anxiously, earnestly.

"My darling, do you ask that?" he inquired reproachfully. "Why, Clematis, you are life to me, my heaven, my very self," he added passionately, drawing her down into his arms. "Oh, you don't know what you are to me; how I reverence, what faith I have in you."

"Faith?" she repeated, and she laughed nervously. "But you—you don't tell me everything," she breathed.

"Why do you say that?"

"You don't trust me," she insisted positively, lifting her eyes and resting her hands on his shoulders.

"I do trust you," he answered.

"But you don't," she still insisted. "You won't tell me everything about my father, how and why, as you say, he renounced me and how I came into your life. Somehow I feel, I am sure there *is* something you don't want me to know! Douglas, you *are* keeping something from me!"

The man's eyes gazed searchingly into the woman's. He very gently removed her hands from his shoulders and rose abruptly, walking over to the fire-place. With impatience, he lit a cigar, drew a whiff or two, discarded it finally into the grate, then turned back to her.

"What do you think I am keeping from you?" he asked, regarding her intently, as she stood leaning against the chair he had vacated. "I have told you before and I tell you once for all that I have always acted toward you honorably."

There was no response from Clematis.

With head bent, hands clasped tensely in front of her, she gazed into the fire. There was an agonized silence. Then swiftly she turned a white face to him, dumb appeal written in her eyes. He screened his own with his hand and moved aside.

"Wasn't there something," she faltered brokenly, "something wrong about my—my coming into your life?"

"No, Clematis, there was nothing wrong about *your* coming into my life."

Her breath came flutteringly and she crushed her hands against her breast.

"But wasn't there something my father did? What was it he did so—so wicked?" she implored desperately.

"He fiendishly abandoned you."

"Where?"

"In the slums."

"In the slums?" she repeated in dead tones.

"Yes."

"To whom?"

"To me!" Marling answered emphatically.

"No, no, to—to Joseph Houlman!" she cried shrilly.

"Did he give me to him? Was I—I bar—did he—?"

"What are you saying, Clematis?" he exclaimed fiercely. "Good God! You must not think such things!"

She did not see the distress on his face; her own white lids veiling her wonderful dark eyes. She stood there, her hands clenched on her breast, her head bent low, a figure of agonized despair.

Then Marling went up to her, caught her to him, closing his arms about her. She seemed heedless of his caress. She knew now it was true, all too radically true! She would know everything, even if she had to go to Wilburton, to see her father! She would find out no matter what it cost her, even love and happiness.

Deliberately she disengaged herself. Then he left her, kissing her, as he always did before going to his downtown office.

When he was gone, she dropped into a chair, smothered her face in her arms and wept bitterly. She had reached a decision. She would go to Wilburton to see her father, and ask him point blank. There would be no getting around it, but he should tell her the truth. She would not wait, but would go to-day, at once.

With this determination in view, she hurried upstairs to her room. Greatly agitated, yet with outward calmness, she quickly made the change from house-gown to street costume, adjusting hat and veil. She picked up her hand-bag to ascertain if she had enough money, then drew on her gloves and finally caught up her furs, for it was wintry outside, though early spring.

As she passed out of the room, it suddenly flashed upon her that Veta Vlotsky might know, since Vallerie lived with her father and worked in his shoe shop. Possibly the wretched man might have unburdened to Vlotsky his tragic history. What if Veta knew the hideous story that she herself had forgotten? What if the girl did know? Would she withhold or give it out willingly?

Clematis turned back into her room and sank into a chair to plan and reflect. After all it might not be necessary for her to make the trip to Wilburton; she did not care for her father. Very probably she could find out all she wanted to know from Veta. Her mind was bent upon one thing and that was to learn her own wretched story. She would go despite the fact that Father Gleason lived in the under-world of Christian known as the Phryne District. She would go even if it were unsafe, even if she encountered this man in his own realms of darkness. But what if her visit availed nothing? In that event, there would be nothing else to do but go to Wilburton.

This settled, she rose and went downstairs. At the foot of the steps, she met Garland. The old servant bowed profoundly. For an instant she hesitated, nervously pretending to adjust her furs.

"Garland, if I am not home for luncheon, don't bother,"

she said quite calmly, not looking at him. "Very probably I shall not be here."

"Yes, madam," he answered courteously and again inclined his head respectfully.

A moment later, she opened the door and passed out to cross the threshold of another world.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLEMATIS decided not to use her limousine, but to engage a public machine as it would not do to drive a magnificent car in the vicinity of the Phryne District. She signalled a taxicab and when she had seated herself and given directions, the mechanic stared at her dumbly for a moment, then caught hold of the steering-wheel and darted away in the direction of Christian's under-world.

Clematis did not drive direct to Father Gleason's, but stopped en route at a fruit stand to buy grapes and oranges for Veta and, a little farther down the street, alighted at a book shop and bought a small volume of verse. She wanted to carry the poor girl something that she would enjoy, something, in the little book of poems that would, in a way, console her. Yet could she find peace in the lawless slums of a so-called Christian city? And Christian's under-world!

Despite the damp and cold grayness of things, children, their faces unwashed, hair unkempt, wretchedly clad, played about the street corners and in the gutters. Bacchantes, boisterous still from the night's revelry, talked loudly or quarrelled vehemently with men who quarrelled back, uttering curses and low epithets.

All this was so revolting to Clematis that she closed her eyes and shuddered. It seemed incredible that she was still in her own city, and all about her ignorance, crime and degradation; a world that respected no law and knew no God!

As she whirled along the narrow, dingy streets, men and boys and not a few women jeered and threw stones, recognizing her as not of their world. A large boy hurled a stone and struck the small square glass in the back of the cab, shattering it.

When she arrived at Father Gleason's and alighted from the cab, another stone was projected in her direction, barely missing her face, mutilating the feather in her hat. The crowd jeered and laughed. She did not turn to speak or even glance at them but hurried into the house.

"You should not have come here, Mrs. Marling," said Robson when he had admitted her, and closed the door on the rabble. "You've done a bold thing in coming here alone. You've endangered your life."

"I—I know," she faltered when she had recovered sufficiently to speak, supporting herself against a bare wall.

When she regained her bearings, she discovered she was in a small, dimly-lighted hall-way almost bare of furniture except for a few chairs; several rooms opened into it on one side, while on the other, a rough wooden staircase, dark and uncarpeted, led to the story above. "I—I had to come," she said finally.

The man stared aghast.

"You had to come?" he questioned in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Don't you know that in coming here you are running a terrible risk of being murdered or captured?"

"Yes," she answered. She was astounded at her own calmness in the face of the situation. Looking straight at Robson, though his brown hair was flecked with gray, she decided that his face was vaguely familiar and, too,

she easily read in his eyes earnest solicitude and great kindness.

"But," she added questioningly, "I am in the house of Father Gleason? Shall I not find protection in the home of a *priest*?"

The man-servant coughed slightly and shaded his mouth with his hand.

"You are safe enough, yes," he assured her, "and you shall have protection, but the danger of it is in your coming here and in returning home. You had better let me take you back before anything happens, before you encounter——"

"No, no," she objected with a gesture of protest. "I am here now and I must, I must ——"

"Why are you here?" he demanded. "Why did you risk so much. Have you an appointment with Father Gleason?"

Clematis felt a cold shiver run down her spine. The very mention of the priest made her shudder.

"No," she said. "I came to see Veta Vlotsky and to bring her a little fruit and a small book of poems. Will she see me?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Marling," the man replied doubtfully. "Just now she is in a bad way. She is still distressed, not having recovered from the shock of her brother's death. You know he was burned that night in the terrible fire that raged in East Sixty-fourth Street."

"Poor boy!" exclaimed Clematis shudderingly. "Was there no way of escape?"

"Yes. There were fire escapes but somehow he didn't get out. No one seems to know how it happened."

Clematis knew all about the boy's trouble. Marling

had told her. She knew that he had come to Christian to find his sister and to hunt down and kill Vance Beverly, the man who had decoyed and broken her life. As she thought of him, now, and dwelt on the boy's great misfortune and mysterious death, it flashed upon her that something terrible *might* have happened to him that night before the fire. Possibly one of Houlman's men had purposefully locked him up in the house so that he could not get out or very probably he had encountered the man he was watching for and that man had killed him. Since he was one of Houlman's gang Vance Beverly was none too good to commit murder. Many, many times this idea had occurred to her but she had never suggested it, even to Marling, for fear he would investigate and become involved in some difficulty which would very likely terminate in an awful tragedy. But now as it crossed her mind, it troubled her greatly, fighting as some fierce stream beats madly against a dam, demanding liberty.

"Perhaps," she intimated in almost a whisper, "perhaps something terrible happened to him that night before the fire. Maybe he was murdered."

The man stood motionless. The woman before him had advanced an idea. No one had thought to investigate; everybody had simply taken it for granted that the boy had been burned to death. What if, before the fire, something tragical had happened to Johan? What if Beverly had killed him. A new light shot in Robson's eyes. Strange it had never occurred to him.

"Murdered?" he repeated in hoarse tones, and he drew very near.

"Yes."

"Who could have done it?"

"Vance Beverly!"

"Why do you say that, Mrs. Marling? How do you know?" Robson questioned eagerly but in the same muffled tones.

"I—I—don't know, really," she said quickly, her breath fluttering, frightened at her daring to give freedom of speech to this man, an utter stranger. "Believe me I don't know anything whatsoever about it," she re-iterated hastily, her breath still coming in little gasps. "Knowing the boy's story, I—I naturally concluded there would be the—unavoidable sequel, the—the inevitable tragedy. It was merely a supposition, you see."

"But it is from mere supposition that we sometimes arrive at conclusions, reach the naked truth by induction or deduction as the case may be," said Robson mildly. "Thank you for the suggestion."

With nervous and jerking fingers, Clematis reached and tore the veil from her face white as marble.

"You won't implicate me?" she begged fearfully. "You won't even quote me as—as having made the suggestion? I—I did not mean to be so thoughtless!"

Robson saw how distressed she was and hastened to relieve her. He was a big, kind fellow with ever sympathy in his soul for women.

"No, Mrs. Marling, I shall not implicate you," he responded hastily. "I shall not mention the fact that I have seen you. Trust me to protect you in all things," he added solemnly, and in his eyes she read honor unquestioned. She knew she had spoken indiscreetly, but she was sure she could trust him. This assurance restored her self-possession, color returned to her cheeks and she drew a long breath of relief. Tears rushed to

her eyes and she gazed at him gratefully, through the mist.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I have faith in you."

"You can trust me," he answered in meaning tones.

"You are very good a—a——"

"Robson," he replied quietly. "And now Mrs. Marling, I think you had better let me take you home," he insisted courteously. "You are in a bad, lawless part of the town and if you go alone, something might happen! I will go with you now."

"No, no, I can't go yet," she protested nervously. "I must see Veta. I must speak with her. Won't you tell her I am here and ask if she will see me?" she implored with evident agitation. The man servant regarded her inquiringly.

"I will find out," he said. "Won't you sit down? I shall be back in a moment."

"Please take these with you," urged Clematis, handing to him the fruit and small book of poems.

Left alone, she felt a sudden uneasiness steal over her and she shivered. All about her was bare, so poverty-stricken. Evidently Father Gleason was very poor and very self-sacrificing. He labored in the slums and was doing a noble work, everyone said, but this she had always doubted seriously. Her meetings with him now passed clearly in review and she was shaken as with a nervous chill. Why was Robson staying so long. What was keeping him? He said he would be back in a moment. In the stillness, a door opened and she heard a man say, "Go to the devil!" Then the door banged with a sharp noise that startled her fearfully and in another moment, Father Gleason stood before her.

"How do you do, Mrs. Marling?" he said smoothly, extending his hand.

The usual voluble smile hovered about his priestly lips. The presence of the man disturbed and angered her. She rose instantly, recoiled from him and vainly endeavored to adjust her veil. After a minute, she mastered herself with some effort.

"How do you do, Father Gleason?" she said icily, completely ignoring his proffered hand. Her manner and refusal to shake hands did not in the least abash him. He only smiled suavely and toyed absently with the phylactery on his left breast.

"I am in good fortune," he observed cordially. "Have I the honor and pleasure of this visit?"

"No, I came to see Veta," she answered promptly, without a hint of trepidation in her voice. She essayed heroically not to be afraid of him.

"Ah, I thought you had come in promise of the contribution you volunteered that day when we met in the snow," he observed casually. "However, you didn't send it. Very likely you forgot."

"Yes."

"It didn't occur to you to send it," he interrupted with a laugh. "But," he urged, "you can give it to me now. No better opportunity! If you haven't the money with you, you can give me a check for my Home of Charity. That day we watched the street urchins play snow-ball and you promised a contribution, I meant to tell you I would accept no paltry sum but you ran away and I didn't have the chance. I won't have a pittance. Marling's a rich fellow and will honor any amount above your signature. I want a round sum! I expect it! I——"

"What do you expect?" she demanded.

"A thousand dollars," he answered coolly. She regarded him with no little astonishment.

"A thousand?"

"Yes."

There was a short silence.

"I will give you two hundred," she said finally.

The priest's eyes glittered and his lips curled with unconcealed disdain.

"Two hundred?" he ejaculated. "That is nothing."

"I won't give you any more," she returned with decision.

"I want what I ask for," came back emphatically. His manner, Clematis thought, was plainly insolent. "I want it and I must have it," he insisted resolutely. "I demand it! Marling can afford it. A thousand dollars is nothing to him. Besides he owes—well I am entitled to it."

"Entitled to it?" she questioned wonderingly. "What do you mean?"

"It's this," he continued in explanation, the glint still in his eyes, "your father, Arthur Vallerie, (poor devil, he is in great affliction now) sold his only property, got the money but never turned it over to the purchaser. I was the *purchaser!*" he shot out with fierce abruptness. "I bought and paid the price of five hundred but to this day I have never been reimbursed nor owned the property. Marling went secretly to Vallerie and offered him more than twice the amount I had paid and got the property. In the excitement of the moment I was taken advantage of and robbed of what legitimately belonged to me. I didn't know of this thieving business until it

was too late, Marling had gone with the property and Vallerie had disappeared with my money. All these years he has not seen fit to pay back nor have I been in rightful possession. I did not fight and go to law about it because—well, I had reasons, and I couldn't afford it. Things have rocked along till now I must be reimbursed. I must either have my money back or possess the property! I demand it! The money or the property!"

"An-and the property? Wh-what was it?" Clematis gasped fearfully, her face white, blood running icily in her veins, chilling her body with death like coldness. Father Gleason regarded her with close scrutiny. Now she understood why he had warned her against Marling. But did Douglas do that? Did he do anything so underhanded, so wicked. She could not, would not believe it. Marling would not do anything dishonorable! Yet—but she quickly shut out the thought from her and turned to the priest.

"An-and the—the property? What—was—it?" she repeated scarcely above her breath.

"The property," he answered glibly, "at the time of purchase was worthless but it turned out valuable. Now it is very costly, in fact, unpurchasable."

"I didn't ask you that," Clematis said sharply, almost shrilly. "I don't want to know *that*. I asked you what constituted the property."

"The property?" he queried, slowly dropping his lids a little but still keeping his eyes fixed on her, "Ah! the property?" he re-iterated softly under his breath. After a moment, he opened wide his eyes that he might more clearly consider the woman before him, then chuckled a low insidious laugh. His mirth was painfully disquiet-

ing. Clematis drew farther from him. Then, like a flash, she comprehended the meaning of his words and the sudden and awful knowledge filled her with horror and amazement, and she hung her head in shame.

Had Marling bought her when she was a mere child and from *her father*? Something choked in her throat, finally she looked up and gazed questioningly at the man before her, unconcealed repulsion in her eyes; this man who wore priest's garb, a rosary about his neck and a phylactery on his breast!

"Do I infer—was I—I—can it be that my father——?" she questioned miserably, her voice failing completely.

"Don't draw inferences," said the priest.

"How-dy-do, Mrs. Marling?" someone called in childish tones from above. The small voice brought instant reassurance to Clematis. Looking up quickly, she espied little Jean leaning over the stair-railing, gazing smilingly down at her.

"How do you do, Jean?" she said, with an effort at cordiality.

"Well, thanks. Did you come to see Mother too?" he asked, inflamed with a boy's curiosity.

The direct question rather embarrassed Clematis, and she flushed under it. She did not reply as she did not want to wound the little fellow. She really had no desire to see Pappeia. It was a rather uncomfortable moment; then the boy spoke, relieving the situation.

"Veta is ever so glad you've come. Says she wants to see you. If you will come right up now, I will show you her room."

"Thank you, Jean," responded Clematis gratefully, and she hurried up the stairs, noiselessly followed by the

priest. In the hall above, which was dimly lighted, the three met Robson who was on his way down to tell her that Veta would receive her.

"She is very glad you have come, Mrs. Marling, and wants very much to see you," he announced respectfully. "Will you please come this way?" he urged, and he turned in the direction of an end hall-room when the boy forestalled him.

"Don't bother, Robson. I will take Mrs. Marling to Veta," he said with manly spirit. The man-servant smilingly acquiesced and stood aside.

The room into which Clematis was ushered, was small and square yet clean and sweet, and daintily feminine, boasting of but two narrow windows that over-looked the back premises of unsightly tenements. A dark green art square with rugs to match covered the floor and the furniture which was of old mahogany and Colonial style consisted of a bed, a low couch, two chairs and dressing-table.

Clematis found the girl looking very white, very thin and ill. Clad in a warm blue wrapper, with dainty lace and ribbons, her lusterless hair brushed smoothly back from her forehead, she lay upon the couch covered with a bright Navajo blanket. Papeia, who had arranged the fruit Clematis had brought in a pretty glass bowl on the dressing-table, stood by endeavoring to tempt her with a bunch of luscious grapes, but she only turned away, murmuring "Not now, Pina. Not now."

The woman replaced the fruit in the glass bowl then came back to her charge. When Clematis entered there was a glow of recognition in her eyes and she smiled graciously.

"How do you do, Mrs. Marling?" she said cordially.

"How do you do?" Clematis answered courteously, extending her hand, then turned her attention to the sick girl, seating herself on a low chair beside her.

"Pina is thoughtful, always so kind," sighed Veta very faintly.

"It is just love, Veta. That is all," responded the woman tenderly. Clematis did not marvel at the bond of sympathy between these two women.

As it came under her observation and as she in a way sketched her own future, she felt a sharp pain at her heart and a sense of isolation steal over her, for she knew that if Marling had wronged her, she would have no one, not even a Pappeia Ardeth, to pity and love her! She felt the tears start to her eyes, then hastily dashed them away, glancing down at the girl who lay quietly regarding her.

"Oh, thank you so much for coming," she said. "It was so good, so good of you, Mrs. Marling to—to come to see me and bring the book and the beautiful fruit," she faltered feebly.

"I hope you will enjoy them," responded Clematis gently.

"I know I shall," answered the girl. "Somehow," she pursued sadly, "I feel as if I know you. Johan told me a lot about you. He was so good. No one brings me things now since he went away. He—he was burned to death you know. Oh, my brother!" she burst out in acute distress. "My brother! I shall never see him again, never! and I loved him so!"

Pappeia, sitting near, rested her head in her arms while Robson, with folded arms, stood against the wall, staring

at Father Gleason who had planted himself at the window and gazed out upon the back tenements, apparently oblivious of what was happening about him, but *he was* listening! Nothing ever escaped him! He had keen ears, for he had ever cultivated the important habit of strict attention. He had reason for coming to Veta's room; Clematis was there!

At the sound of the girl's sobbing, he did not even turn, but remained at the window, drumming idly with his fingers. Little Jean played happily with his toys, most of them he kept in Veta's room, for it was here on disagreeable days he came to amuse himself. He loved Veta dearly, and to her he had been a great comfort, even given hours of pleasure. The child's heart now ached because of the woman's pain and no longer able to see her in distress, he jumped up quickly, ran to her and gently drew her hands from her face, his little mouth quivering as if he, too, were on the verge of a breakdown.

"Don't cry, Veta," he implored, kissing away the tears. Then he ran back to his toys. "Do look at my Teddy bear and Billy 'possum. See, they are marching together like soldiers!" he exclaimed, making them stand erect, then parade up and down like experienced army officers. "They are not enemies."

"No, you must never let them fight," said Clematis earnestly. "They must always be friends."

"Of course," assented the boy. "Love one another," he quoted. "Even bears and 'possums must be friends!"

Clematis smiled and Pappia caught up the child in her arms and kissed him.

"Toleration, eh?" chuckled the priest, scarcely changing his position.

"Toleration?" sneered Robson. "There is none shown by the lion for the lamb. The big savage beast steals the young innocent, lures it into his den and when he has squelched out the very life goes sneaking about the world for others. Once entrapped, there is no escape."

The priest laughed.

"Gad, Robson, when did you become such an altruist?" he asked, turning round.

"God! There is no escape," Veta cried suddenly, and in a pained, harsh voice. "There is no hope for us, Pina, no future. There is nothing to do but die!" she added bitterly.

"You must not say these things, Veta," remonstrated Clematis. "The past is gone, merged in eternity, the future lies beyond! You should not grieve and make yourself ill, but you must get well and be strong."

"But I—I can't get well," sobbed the girl. "I can't! If I did, what then? But there is no use!" she sighed desperately. "No use! There is no future for *me*!"

"But there is use," insisted Clematis gently. "Life at best seems short, but, oh, the days in a lifetime! God gives to us another day and another and still another, then the end!"

"And my end may be tomorrow, now!" said Veta hopelessly and she closed her eyes wearily, and Clematis saw tears glisten through the lashes and trickle down the thin pallid cheeks; for a moment, she felt a lump gather in her own throat. "Oh," Veta burst out, "how I should love to go home." For a moment she sobbed softly, then, later continued reminiscently: "We lived in Hilton Street,

23 Hilton Street, I remember, in a shabby, one-story, old red brick building with green blinds, where father had his shoe shop. The shoe shop was in front with a sign over the door: Herman Vlotsky, Shoemaker, while the private rooms were in the back of the building. It was all dull, so monotonous. I was impatient as Rasselas to explore and go beyond my world! I went, but it was a man's world I found, a man's brutality, a man's cruel treachery! I wanted love and happiness, but they were not to be mine! I found not heaven, but hell! Now I—I would love to go home!" she re-iterated with a sob. "Home to father and the shoeshop!"

"Go to him, dear," persuaded Clematis earnestly. "Your coming would brighten his life, make him happy. Doubtless he is very lonely. There is no one with him now except—except Mr. Vallerie," she added, purposely touching upon the object of her visit, her pulse quickening. With fingers clasped tensely in her muff, the warm furry thing against her face, Clematis leaned forward in nervous suspense.

The room was very still now. Robson stood mute against the wall, never once shifting his eyes from Father Gleason, who, when Vallerie's name was mentioned, lifted his eyebrows significantly and laid his forefinger on his lips. He glanced swiftly at Pappia, who, after a moment, lowered her eyes and, carelessly toyed with a bit of velvet ribbon, watching, through half-closed lids, her boy at play with his toys. Veta lay very still, her hands folded upon her breast.

"Yes, Mr. Vallerie is with him," she murmured very slowly, her lips twitching slightly. The priest once more glanced at Pappia, then approached and rested an arm

on the footboard of the bed, nonchalantly fingering the fifth bead of his rosary. As he stood near Clematis, ever and anon he caught a faint whiff of violets and the fragrance thrilled him, intoxicated his very senses, but he dared not stir, dared not draw nearer to her, for he was vexedly conscious of the steady, penetrating eyes of his man-servant who advanced and waited not far distant.

Father Gleason had always feared his man-servant. Despite this uneasiness, he retained Robson in his employ because he was competent, intelligent, trustworthy. Then, too, there were other reasons why he kept him. The priest was content to stand there and feast his eyes on Clematis, noting the exquisite delicacy of her profile. She was unconscious of his gaze, unconscious of everything except the pale, bedridden girl.

"But Mr. Vallerie is not you, Veta," she said quickly.

"No," answered Veta, "but he is some comfort, maybe, and help to father. He came to us wretched and miserable, and father, who had suffered much, pitied him, welcomed him into our home and apprenticed him in the shoe shop until he is skilled in his line of work and is of great assistance."

"Great assistance?" queried Clematis in astonishment. "What can he do?"

"He smoothes soles," said Veta quietly.

Father Gleason laughed.

"Soothes souls," he chuckled humorously. Pappeia gurgled softly, while a tentative smile stole over the rather glum features of Robson.

"But he is a paralytic and hopeless drug fiend," Clematis pursued hurriedly, her eyes fixed upon the sad, wan face of the invalid.

"Yes, he has been so ever since we've known him, and even before he came to us," Veta responded feebly. "His feet and legs are paralyzed, occasioned by the use of some powerful drug, so he sits there day in and day out at work, taking his tablets. If he doesn't have his tablets, he gets mad, almost insane and scarcely knows what he is doing, and at times loses consciousness. They say he murdered his wife and—and—"

"Wronged his daughter!" cried Clematis in a sharp ringing voice. Veta started nervously and was a little frightened at the way Clematis had spoken.

"Yes, they say he did that but—I—I don't know," she stammered faintly.

"You do know, Veta, *you do know!*" exclaimed Clematis almost fiercely, her face white with agony. "You are like the rest of them, hiding things from me."

"I—I am not hiding things from you," faltered the girl.

"I don't know!" she declared emphatically between sobs.

"Didn't he—he tell your father?"

"If he did, father never told me," she answered brokenly. "Mr. Vallerie never told me anything. I—I didn't know he was your father until lately, until Pina told me."

It was plain enough that Veta was honest, that she really did not know. There was but one thing to do now, go at once to Wilburton and face her father. Hastily adjusting her furs, Clematis rose.

"Yes, I am Arthur Vallerie's daughter!" she said with sudden harshness. No one spoke. Pappeia and Father Gleason merely exchanged glances; Robson simply glared at them, while the boy on the floor looked up quickly from his toys, questioning in his eyes.

Sickened by the idea of barter, Clematis turned aside with a shudder and bowed her head. A hand on her shoulder roused her, and, looking up, she gazed into the eyes of the priest.

"My daughter, Vallerie is your father," he said mildly. "Shall you forgive him?"

Quickly Clematis shook off the detaining hand and retreated. "I do not believe in confession!" she replied fearlessly. The priest smiled blandly.

"So Marling still does not deal openly with you? He still has his secrets! For a long time he did not let you know about—well about your marriage to him, which you had quite forgotten, and now keeps *this* from you! I suppose he has motives for hiding things!" he added with cool suggestiveness.

Like a serpent ready to spring, Robson shot forward, fire in his eyes.

"Take back your insinuations," he ordered fiercely. "Mr. Marling is not a man to hide things! He is a man of honor!"

"I—I didn't mean any insinuation," stammered Father Gleason, instantly getting out of reach of his man-servant. Clematis looked up in astonishment. Why was this man upholding Marling? She did not know, could not even place him. Yet there was something strangely familiar about him.

"You are good, Robson, very kind," she said appreciatively.

"Don't mention it, please, Mrs. Marling," he protested with an emphatic gesture.

"But why did you defend Mr. Marling?" she questioned. "Did you know him?"

"Yes, years ago."

"How did you know him? In what capacity?"

"Simply as a mechanician."

A sudden light now flashed upon her and she recalled Alicia telling her once of a man named Thomas who was present at that early marriage and that this same Thomas was a splendid man and mechanician, whom, later for some unknown reason, Marling dismissed from his service. The sudden knowledge excited her a little and she felt almost near to him.

"Then you are—are Thomas, the mechanician, whom ——" she cried impulsively, but the sentence went unfinished, being rudely interrupted by the priest, who glowered darkly and with angry suspicion.

"Who are you, fellow?" he demanded.

"I am. Robson, man-servant to your reverence," was the answer, fearless and emphatic. For good reasons Father Gleason did not argue the point. He was an actor superbly astute, ever ready to seize the moment. Instantly the scowl gave way to smiles.

"My dear Mrs. Marling," he said, addressing Clematis, with priestly gentleness, "you should not be kept in the dark, you should know the truth. It is your right to know! You came here to learn your own story, but since Veta can not enlighten you I will supply the facts in the case and bare things in their true nakedness. Pardon't if I pain you, but you ——"

A meaning gesture from Clematis checked him abruptly.

"Don't say any more, please!" she ordered imperiously. "I shall get the truth from my—from Mr. Vallerie."

An expression almost of exultation crossed the face of

the priest and he laughed pleasantly, showing his strong yellow teeth.

"As you choose," he responded suavely. "That is your privilege. But I meant to save you a trip to Wilburton and an unhappy interview with a—a lunatic. Then you do intend going to see him?" he asked with affected non-chalance.

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-day. Now."

"Ah, daughter, you are doing right, the proper thing," pursued Father Gleason in the same dulcet tones. "Don't delay. Every day that passes puts him nearer to the grave. Go, my child, and find out for yourself!"

"Don't go," pleaded Pappeia earnestly. "It will do no good. The wisest and safest plan will be to go straight to your husband and let him explain everything. Besides, going to Wilburton might occasion you discomfort, even entail danger. One never knows what is going to happen! Then too ——"

"Don't ill-advise her, Pina," cut in the priest sharply. "Nothing er—er unfortunate is likely to happen. Besides, Mrs. Marling is no infant! She is a woman and has fully made up her mind. I should advise her to go by all means. It is the only sensible thing for her to do. She is entitled to the truth, and I don't blame her! Besides, it is none of *your* business! You are still determined, Mrs. Marling?" he questioned deeply interested.

A throb of actual physical pain shot through Clematis accentuating the agonized, far-away look in her eyes. She had no thought of the priest, no thought of anything except to know all.

"Yes," she stammered. "I must go! I—I must see my father and—and find out! I can't bear it! I—I—" and she broke off, miserably, and lowered her head till the tears trickled down and glistened upon her muff.

"Per-perhaps you will see father an—and maybe he will—will ask about me," faltered Veta, her breath flutteringly painfully, her hands folding and unfolding nervously. With great difficulty, Clematis struggled to recover herself.

"Yes, I—I suppose so," she answered after a moment. "In case I do see him, would you like me to tell him anything?"

"Yes," answered Veta, tears stealing out of her eyes and slowly making their way down her cheeks.

"If—if you see father, tell him if he still cares and wants me, I will come back to him. Tell him that I love him an-d I want to come back home," she added slowly and with great effort between sobs.

"I will tell him," replied Clematis brokenly, and, bending low, she kissed the girl tenderly on her thin, wan cheek.

"God love you, dear Mrs. Marling, and keep you safe always," she breathed in deep emotion, catching Clematis's hand in both of hers and kissing it passionately.

"And you," murmured Clematis fervently.

"Please kiss me, too, Mrs. Marling," implored little Jean, approaching Clematis and gazing pleadingly up at her. Without a word, she bent down and kissed the child lightly upon the forehead, then swiftly left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

LEAVING Veta's room, Clematis hurried along the dim, narrow hall and down the bare wooden stairs, but before reaching the door, the priest forestalled her.

"You won't forget your promise, the contribution, you know?" he taxed, and he glanced meaningly at his manservant who had followed directly and stood now obediently silent. "You won't forget?" he repeated emphatically.

"No."

"When may I expect it?"

"In a day or two."

"But that's not specific. I want to know definitely. What day will you send it?"

Clematis debated for a moment.

"I cannot do it today," she said positively. "To-morrow is Friday. Maybe ——"

"You are superstitious about Friday?" queried the priest.

"Sometimes it is a bad luck day," she answered, fearlessly meeting his eyes.

Father Gleason laughed confidently.

"Let us hope, Mrs. Marling, it will not be so in *my* case," he said. "You will not fail me?"

"I shall remember."

"You swear?"

"I don't swear, Father Gleason," she retorted fiercely, then, with a swift movement, she rushed past, jerked open the door and was gone, leaving the priest in a rage.

"To hell with her," he muttered savagely. Robson chuckled softly under his breath.

Once free and in the open, Clematis fled as for her life, running with fawn-like fleetness for many blocks until her breath failed and she was compelled to stop and rest. While she waited to catch her breath, she looked about her fearfully lest the priest should sneak out unexpectedly and confront her. Standing there on the narrow street corner, she felt her heart throb tumultuously as an imprisoned bird, beating its wings wildly to regain liberty.

At last a surface car, slowly wending its way into view, approached, and noting at once that it was headed for the Central Station, Clematis boarded it with infinite relief to find herself moving away from the Phryne District and the vicinity of Father Gleason.

When she reached the station she found that the train for Wilburton had just pulled out and that there would not be another for half an hour, so she bought a magazine and sat down to wait. But distracting thoughts, would not permit her to read, so, closing the book, she tried to become interested in the people about her. There were men, women and children, women with crying babies, babies asleep with pacifiers in their mouths, babies drinking milk from their bottles, evidently contented.

After a seemingly long wait, she glanced at the big clock on the wall and discovered that she had but a few minutes in which to purchase a ticket and board the train. Rising, she hurried to the office, bought her ticket, and was just on the point of turning away when she unexpectedly came face to face with a man with horribly squinting eyes, heavy black moustache, streaked with grey and wearing a long, dark overcoat. She did not know the man, but the sudden encounter

startled her fearfully. Perhaps her nerves were all wrong.

"I beg pardon," he said in deep, guttural tones.

Barely acknowledging the apology, she hastened to catch her train, and had scarcely seated herself when the man wearing the long dark overcoat came in and occupied the seat across the aisle from her. Intuitively she felt his eyes fixed upon her, she did not dare glance at him. Instead, she gazed out of the car window watching the mass of humanity passing to and fro, some arriving, others departing, eager to make time.

At last the train started, moving slowly from under the shed. The man opposite took out his glasses, adjusted them, then unfolded his newspaper and pretended to read, yet ever and anon glancing furtively across at her. After a moment, he put away his paper and fastened his eyes upon her, taking in every line, the curve of her lips, even the quiver of her eye lids. She flushed hotly under his scrutiny and shrank down deeper in the corner of her seat. Who was this man across from her? Did he belong to Houlman's gang? Could he be *Joseph Houlman*?

Was he going to Wilburton? The question was soon answered. He *did* get out at Wilburton. She was certain of it, for she saw him leave the train, yet when she alighted a moment later he was nowhere to be seen. She was immensely relieved.

Hurriedly passing through the station to a side street, she discovered a dilapidated taxicab, quickly entered it and gave directions. The man at the wheel stared curiously as others had done, then opened the throttle, and the noisy, shakily machine went

speeding along, throbbing and shouting honk, honk, as it traveled over rough cobble stones, which were wet and slippery from the slow mist of rain.

Clematis had not thought to bring a parasol, in fact she had not the least idea that she would be caught in a rain. But then she did not mind, she was warmly clad and did not take cold easily.

As she was being whirled in the direction of Vlotsky's shoe shop, she tried to look out and see something of the streets through which she passed, but the cracked glass in the cab was so blurred by the tiny drops of water that she leaned back against the faded red cushions and pictured to herself the forthcoming interview with her father.

Hilton Street was down in the slums, ugly, narrow, and ill-smelling, almost an alley, flanked on both sides by dirty, wretched tenements, where the sun seldom reached to shed its munificent and purifying rays. No wonder Veta hated Hilton Street; hated living in the slums of Wilburton. No one could blame her for reaching out and longing for a brighter, happier world.

There had been no change in Vlotsky's place, which he had occupied for years, ever since his coming to Wilburton. It was the same shabby, red brick building, with green blinds, over the door of which flared the sign, Herman Vlotsky, Shoemaker.

Arriving at the curb, Clematis alighted from the cab, paid the mechanic, telling him that, if he cared, he might come back for her in half an hour. A moment later she crossed the pavement, opened the door and entered the shoe shop.

Scarcely advancing beyond the threshold, the door

swinging to behind her, she stopped suddenly, drew a quick inward breath to check an involuntary exclamation, and waited as if dazed by the familiarity of things. How vivid had been her dream! How strangely accurate! The shoe shop was before her in actual reality. It was a small square room with smoked walls and low windows. In one corner stood a rusty stove through the cracks of which gleamed smoking coals and oozed tiny volumes of gray vapor. All about were tools, lasts and strips of leather, and there were shoes newly made, shoes in the process of making, shoes brought to be mended, maybe with new tops, new heels, new soles. Herman Vlotsky was not there.

The shop was deserted save for a wretched, decrepit man, with deep sunken eyes, yellow, wrinkled skin and long snow-white hair that reached to his shoulders. Suspended above him was a thirty-two candle electric bulb which burned brightly, as daylight was not sufficient for his failing eyesight as he sat there by the window smoothing soles. As soon as she rested her eyes upon him, Clematis recognized him, for he was an exact replica of the ignoble man in her dream who had no qualms about accepting the money from Marling.

As she looked at him she gave a little gasp. Was he, could this man be her father? She covered her face with her hands for a moment. When she entered, he glanced up casually, then went on with his work. Before speaking to her, he reached over, opened a small glass jar containing white tablets, took out one and swallowed it greedily, then said in a feeble, quivering voice:

"Did you bring shoes to be mended?"

"No."

"Do you want new ones?"

"No."

The man continued mechanically at his work.

"You would like to speak to Herman Vlotsky?" he asked finally.

"Yes, I have a message for him," she replied, her voice quivering from uncontrolled agitation.

"I'm sorry, but he is not here to-day. He went to Christian to buy shoe leather and won't be back before to-morrow."

"Does he know about his son?" asked Clematis abruptly.

"What about him?" inquired the man.

"There was a terrible fire in East Sixty-fourth Street and Johan was burned to death."

A shiver stole over the man disturbing him greatly.

"Horrible!" he muttered. "Horrible! No, he doesn't know about Johan, but—an—and the daughter," he faltered finally.

"She is in the house of a priest, Father Gleason, at No. 10 Phryne Street. The poor girl is in a wretched condition," pursued Clematis. "I am just from her bedside. She requested me to tell her father that she loves him and that if he still cares and wants her, she will come back to him. You won't forget to tell him when he returns?"

"No, I shall deliver the message," was the response. "You say the fire was in—in East Sixty-fourth Street?" he asked, with difficulty, taking another tablet to brace his nerves. "Was it—it—The Morning-glory, Joseph Houlman's cabaret and gambling stall?"

"Yes," answered Clematis hoarsely, keeping her eyes fixed on the man, who became white as death. In his

agitation, he overturned the glass tube, breaking it and spilling out the white square tablets. When he saw what he had done, he gave a cry, reaching out for the little blocks of drug with his long emaciated fingers, finally devouring one, then two as if in starvation. Clematis watched him with a shudder. Mastering herself with an effort and placing her hand over her heart, which was throbbing painfully, she came closer and stood looking down at him.

"You are Arthur Vallerie?" she said tensely.

A surprised expression came into the man's eyes, and he glared at her, then murmured faintly and with decided hesitation:

"Yes. I am Arthur Vallerie! Who are you?" he cried shrilly, straining his vision as if he would discern her very features. "Althea! Althea! My beautiful one!" he exclaimed jerkily, extending his hands in a sort of frenzy.

"No, not Althea Delmar," she said hoarsely, "but—"

"Clematis!" he gasped in a wild paroxysm of frenzy.

"Yes," she faltered, then her voice failed utterly.

"Oh, my child, you have come in answer to my prayer, to show me mercy in my last hour for the great wrong I—I did you!" he cried. "God! how I have prayed! How I have waited this day, this very moment! You will forgive, child, and pity me, a dying old man. I have met retribution. "See!" and he pushed aside the board and tools that she might view his stiff, dead limbs. But she could not look at them. With a sickening sense of horror, she turned away, hiding her face in her muff. "You will forgive, child? Say you will," he implored piteously. "But tell me," he burst out erratically, laughing in childish

ecstasy, supremely confident of pardon, "you are Marling's wife?"

Slowly Clematis drew down her muff.

"Yes, I—I am his wife," she murmured in low, miserable tones.

"He married you when you were a—a child?"

"I—I was very young."

"He married you legally?"

"Yes."

"Better fellow than I gave him credit for. He has always been good to you?"

"Yes. Most indulgent."

"Hum. Then he's turned out a good sort," he sneered. "Somehow I never liked him. Do you love him?"

"No, I—I don't love him," answered Clematis slowly.

"Then you are not happy?"

"No, I—I am not happy now!"

"That is to be expected! How can you be happy with him? Come closer, child, so that I can see you," he pleaded abruptly. When she had drawn nearer, he scanned her with strained vision. "Child, you are beautiful! When you were little, you were very nervous, and very ugly," and he laughed childishly. "Now you are beautiful, Clematis, and so like your mother, beautiful! Come kiss me, be a daughter to me and say you will forgive the great wrong I did you." Clematis did not move. "You won't come, won't forgive?" he cried harshly, shaking visibly, while a death-like pallor stole over his almost distorted features. "I suppose that fellow Marling has prejudiced you against me and told you I was a villain, that I was cruel to you and —"

"What motives?"

Vallerie laughed shrilly.

"He—he doesn't want you to know! You don't really know how you came into Marling's life? You never even suspected?"

"Yes. I—I did suspect, and when I taxed him with my suspicion he declared that he always acted toward me honorably."

Vallerie laughed mirthlessly and his mock hilarity so startled Clematis that she stood shivering, her face white and drawn.

"*Honorably!*" he chuckled hideously. "Does Marling know honor? He doesn't know anything but commercialism! He is no better than Arthur Vallerie!"

Again the man laughed, but this time hysterically. Clematis turned aside, hiding her face in her hands.

"Marling didn't tell you," Vallerie cried shrilly, "that he bought and paid for you?"

"No," said Clematis hoarsely.

"That he paid double the amount I received from Houlman?"

"No."

"That after I—I you—you had been sold to Houlman for five hundred dollars he sneaked up to me, after he found out who you were, and demanded that I give you to him?"

"No," came very low and quivering.

"He didn't tell you, that, when he saw that I hadn't the least idea of considering it, and that I was about to pull out with my money, he came across at once and offered me double the amount and settled things satisfactorily with Houlman?"

"No."

"Was that acting toward you honorably?" cried Vallerie. "*Now you know how you came into his life.*"

"Oh?"

A poignant cry of agony was the only interruption.

"You are telling me the truth?" she said finally, her voice choked with tears, her face still white and drawn.

"Yes, yes, the truth, child," Vallerie answered sharply. "God knows it is the truth!" he added solemnly, his face twitching horribly, eyes bulging luminously, while his lean fingers searched for more tablets. "You were all I possessed in the world and I had to have my—my little blocks of drug! I know, child, I know! It was a terrible wrong, but there was no other way, n-no other way!" he wailed childishly, then began to sob convulsively.

Clematis had accomplished her purpose, and there was no reason why she should linger. She must go. But where? Return to Marling? Impossible! He had lied to her and never again could she trust him! She would live out her own life, work her own way in the world.

She cast upon the paralyzed man one withering glance, then without a word turned in the direction of the door.

"You are going, Clematis? Don't go yet. Don't go! You must forgive, child. You *must*! I—I don't want to die with this—this sin on my soul without forgiveness," he stammered painfully, almost sobbing. "I—I told you the truth because I—I wanted *you* to know! But," he burst out shrilly after a moment. "You did not come to see me to—to for —"

"No, to find out the truth," she flashed, not looking at him.

"But you knew before you came," he supplemented, breathing hard.

"Yes," she answered harshly, "Father Gleason told me, said that you—you sold me to him; that you—"

"Took the money and never paid back," supplied a man in harsh, guttural tones who had entered stealthily. At the sound of the intruder's voice Clematis and Vallerie looked up startled. The stranger shifted his gaze from one to the other, a smile of triumph on his lips. Clematis recognized him instantly as the man she had encountered in the station at Christian and who sat across the aisle in the car, and who mysteriously disappeared on his arrival in Wilburton. Vallerie knew him, too, for he could never fail to recognize Joseph Houlman! For a space Houlman stared rudely at Clematis, smiling elatedly.

"I *knew* I should find you here!" he said to her, then turned to Vallerie, "You took my money all right and never paid back."

Vallerie, white as a ghost, crouched down in his seat like a frightened animal, while cold beads of perspiration oozed out on his face and body, chilling and making him shiver horribly.

"I've got no money, Houlman," he cried helplessly. "No money!"

"You buy morphia!"

"Yes, yes, but that is all," wailed the stricken man.

"Then you have got money," persisted Houlman impatiently.

"No, no, I— have no money! I tell you! I have no money!" Vallerie screeched shrilly. "Vlotsky gives me nothing! He is a—a stingy beast. He—"

"Ungrateful fool!" cut in Houlman jeeringly. "Vlot-sky furnishes you clothing, food, shelter, and buys you morphia, yet he gives you nothing! Who would tolerate you, a drug fiend and a lunatic?"

"Yes, I—I know, but I—I—" whimpered Vallerie.

"Shut up your blubbing," commanded Houlman, "and say what you are going to do about it!"

"About what?" drivelled the other.

"About the money you stole from me and never paid back!"

"But I can't pay back, Houlman, I tell you! I can't pay back!" cried the wretched man.

"Then if you don't I'll—"

"Do what?" exclaimed Vallerie.

"Take possession!" shot out Houlman doggedly.

"But you can't, you can't! She—she's Marling's wife!"

"Damn Marling!" gnashed the man of the League. "She is mine, I tell you, mine! You sold her to me and I paid you for her! Priority of sale gives me possession! The law recognizes that! There is no way getting around it, and you needn't try to whip out of it!"

"But Marling reimbursed you to release and—"

"That is out of the question," cut in Houlman savagely. "If you don't pay back the money you stole from me I mean to take possession and now!"

Clematis whitened to the lips and she felt the blood run cold in her body. As she heard what passed between the two men, she turned shudderingly and crushed her hands against her breast. How horrible, how sickening and degrading! So this was Joseph Houlman, and she now stood helpless in his clutches! What must she do? There

was no time to lose, scarcely a moment in which to think. She lifted her head jerkily and glanced quickly and nervously at him. And as she looked up, she met his wolfish eyes glaring back into hers. And his eyes! How strangely they were like Father Gleason's! The very thought of the priest chilled her and she shivered. For the barest second she waited, then fled, but ere she reached the door the man forestalled her.

"Not so swift, my pretty girl, not so swift!" he said suavely. "There is time, plenty of time. I am going back directly and will take you with me! We shall go back to Christian together!"

The idea of going back to Christian with this man terrified her.

"Out of my way and let me pass!" she commanded fiercely.

"Don't be so sassy, Clematis," he said, still confronting her and keeping his wicked eyes fixed on her. "Sassiness isn't becoming in one of your sort. Be easy and don't get up in the air about it. I'll take you back to Christian, don't you worry about that."

"Out of my way, I told you, and let me pass!" she repeated sharply, making another attempt to elude him.

"Don't do that again, Clematis," he urged, catching her wrists and detaining her. "If you make another attempt to escape I will hurt you and I don't want to do that. Be reasonable and come with me like a sensible woman."

"Let me go!" she ordered harshly. "Let me go!"

"Not yet, my pretty girl, not till you promise to come with me like a sensible young woman," he said, tightening his grip on her wrists till she felt the pain. Gathering all her strength, she wrenched herself free.

"Don't you *dare touch* me!" she said. "Don't come near me!"

He laughed hoarsely.

Once more she essayed to elude him, but he caught her and this time gripped her wrists so hard that she could not extricate herself.

"Don't hurt her, Houlman," screeched Vallerie, who had roused himself from the stupor into which he had fallen.

"Shut up, you blithering idiot," ordered the other roughly. "What do you know about treating a woman decently?"

Vallerie glared blankly for a moment, then lapsed into a maudlin stupor.

Joseph Houlman glowered at the stricken man for an instant, then turned his attention to the woman he held before him.

It was useless to try to escape. Another attempt might prove hazardous, for his fingers still bound her wrists like bands of steel. Oh! if someone would come! If someone *would* come!

Then she swayed forward and fell limply against him, he catching and holding her roughly in his arms. He held her close to him, then bent down and tried to kiss her, but her hat hid her face from him and protected her from this last insult.

"God! You're mine! Mine! That fellow Marling can't cheat me out of possession now!" he chuckled in low exultation. Joseph Houlman was not a man to let things slip, so made haste to make sure of ownership. He laughed softly while he thrust his free hand into an inside pocket and was in the act of whipping out a small bot-

tle of chloroform, when a terrific blow on the back of the head hurled him down like a giant tree felled in a forest. He struck the floor with such tremendous force that for a space he lay there glaring at the ceiling of the shoe shop. Then as consciousness returned, he became sensible of the pain that racked his head and body, felt the blood trickle down his neck, and groaned audibly. After a little he lifted himself with an effort, looked about dazedly, and when he saw who had snatched victory from him, he fell back paralyzed with fear. Terrified by the thought that he had come to the end of things and was about to pass beyond the door of the criminal's cell, Joseph Houlman, like the coward that he was, dared not stir. Gladly would he have scrambled to his feet and escaped, but the man who had broken up his little game stood regarding him, with stern eyes, jaws square and tight set.

"Devil! Accursed bully!" he ground out between compressed lips.

To this the man on the floor made no answer, but lay there meekly, leering viciously through half-closed lids at the man and woman, watching his chance.

On the other hand, the man who had come in the nick of time, now turned his attention to the woman. Feeling herself free, Clematis caught her breath in relief and braced herself against the wall for support. She stood leaning against the rough, cold stone with eyes closed, till she recovered composure to a degree. Then she glanced about her and finally at the man who had rescued her and, for the first time, looked straight into the eyes of Douglas Marling.

Unable to encounter his patient look, she turned



"HE STRUCK THE FLOOR WITH TREMENDOUS FORCE."

and gazed out of the window. She felt the tears well in her eyes and in her throat, but she mastered herself and turned once more to face Marling, defiance in her gaze. Then he came up to her and spoke very gently.

"Come Clematis," he said, "let me take you home. This is no place for you."

"I might as well be here as anywhere," she answered bitterly. "Nothing matters now."

"Yes it does matter. Everything matters," he insisted. "Come, let's go home," and he passed his arm protectingly about her and gently urged her forward a step or two, then she stood stock still and wrenched herself free.

"No," she flashed, "I won't go back with you!"

For a bare instant Marling stared at her in wondering amazement. Then he realized that her nerves were upset and that he must be gentle, very patient with her.

"Your nerves are all wrong, Clematis."

"No, it's not my nerves," she flung back defiantly. "It's you! Go back with you. Never! I won't live another day under your roof. I won't suffer humiliation."

"Humiliation?" he questioned emphatically. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," she answered decidedly. "Humiliation to be under obligations to you."

"But a wife is not under obligations to her husband," he insisted.

"I am not your wife! All is over between us! We have come to the end of the road. Henceforward our paths lie in different directions. That child marriage I will not consider!"

"What about that night when you married me according to my views?" he asked steadily.

"That night," she answered callously, not looking at him, "is a thing of the past. We were both mad, and we must forget that there was ever such a night. Never again will I plight those vows with you. You lied to me once, and how do I know but that you will go on lying to me the rest of my life? When I asked you about that question of barter, you denied it emphatically to save yourself from the brand of commercialism!"

"Brand of commercialism?" he repeated harshly, looking straight into her eyes. Her words hurt him.

"Yes," she shot back fiercely, not wavering under his searching gaze.

"You are commercial!"

For a full minute he stood regarding her steadily, arms folded across his breast. When he spoke it was in even tones of decision.

"No, Clematis," he said calmly. "I won't consider that child marriage. The thing for you to do," he urged placidly, "is to get a divorce; get it on the plea of—well, any grounds you choose. You will have no trouble from me. There is one thing certain," he said emphatically, "when you have gotten your divorce, you shall not leave my house empty-handed. You shall have settled on you a splendid annuity, and —"

"I won't have it," she cried quickly. "I won't take a penny of *your* money."

"Why, Clematis?"

"When I put that question of barter to you, you told me that you had always acted honorably toward me. *Honorably!*" she repeated scathingly.

"What I did for you was done for your sake," he said earnestly.

"Since you did, why weren't you man enough to tell me the truth?"

"I did not want you to suffer pain and mortification."

"Pain and mortification!" she reiterated scornfully.

The two faced each other, the woman burning with excitement; the man self-possessed, reproach in his eyes.

"You are unjust, Clematis, cruelly unjust. What I did was to save you from the most despicable reprobate in Christian, that man lying there on the floor," he cut in harshly, his voice shaking perceptibly. "Great God! can't you see? Don't you understand?" he added desperately. "Let me explain. Let me tell you the truth now!"

"The truth! Explain! There is no need of an explanation now."

"I *will* tell you! There is need of explanation!" Instantly he caught her wrists and held her before him. "You shall hear me, Clematis," he said sternly, holding her in an iron grip, despite her cries and writhing efforts to extricate herself. "Your beast fiend of a father yonder," he continued, "sacrifice you. When I discovered who you were, he had already bartered you to Joseph Houlman, the most rapacious, most lascivious reptile in man's disguise, but I was determined to save you from them both, your father and Houlman, no matter what it cost me. Your father would not give you up without money; Joseph Houlman would not release you without money, so I bought them off, paid the scoundrels handsomely to get you out of their clutches. God knows I would have given the devils twenty, forty, fifty thousand times their price to save you from them. I did what I knew to be honorable! If there had been another way,

I would have saved you, but there was no other way. My God! It was *the only way!* I paid *the price of honor!*"

With a piercing, agonized cry, she fell down in front of him, groveling at his feet. She lay there, her face in her arms, in a passion of grief. As if in a great searchlight flashed on in its full power, she saw all things clearly now. She saw that he had been actuated by the most honorable motive. And she had repudiated him! What must he think of her now? She had deliberately cast out love and forfeited his very respect. He would never take her back. Never!

If only she had acted differently! A fresh burst of sobbing tore her heart. She would have liked to cry to him for forgiveness, but she dared not. He, on the other hand would not give it without the asking. He did not move to take her in his arms and tell her he would take her back and forget. No, instead, he stood there waiting for the storm of grief to spend itself.

Then when she seemed calmer, he wheeled around and pointing a finger at Vallerie, said dramatically to her:

"Ask that man why he sacrificed you?"

"I—I know," she answered brokenly. "Don't tell me anything more. I—I can't bear it!"

"Tell her, you libertine, why you sacrificed her!" he continued severely. "Tell her the truth! Don't die with a lie on your lips!"

An agonizing, gasping sound came from Vallerie as he writhed and twisted under the scathing words as if scorched by the very sound of them, still cowering like some human deformity.

"She—she knew before she came here. Fa-Father Gleason told her."

Instantly Marling swung about and faced Clematis, his eyes expressing amazement and indignation. She had disregarded his wishes entirely and flung obstinacy in his face.

"Father Gleason told you?" he said to her.

"Yes," she admitted faintly, not looking at him.

"Where did you see him?"

"At his house," she returned openly.

"At his house?"

"Yes."

"Did you go there purposely?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes."

"Why did you go there? I thought you distrusted Father Gleason. Besides, didn't you know he lives in the criminal part of the city? God! he might have insulted you."

"Father Gleason is a priest, and his work and charity are chiefly among women. He gives them home and employment," said Joseph Houlman, who now shambled to his feet despite the torturing pain in his head and body. His eyes glittering with a devilish light in them and, as he looked at Marling, they glared like red slits of flame..

"Charity!" echoed Marling witheringly. "Infamous scoundrel! His work is to send women to hell."

And as he gazed back into the man's eyes, he thought how like Father Gleason's! And his strong yellow teeth, as they gleamed hideously between bestial lips, how, too, they were like Father Gleason's! The resemblance of the two men, Joseph Houlman and the priest, struck him

forcibly as it had startled Clematis.

"That craven of a priest's business is to send women to hell," he repeated passionately.

No reply came from the man of the League except a sharp hissing sound as of a serpent infuriated, making ready to spring. His coarse, beastly face flushed darkly and he stood with his hand behind him as if he were ready to whip out some deadly weapon. This position of menace was scarcely observed by Marling, who once more faced Clematis with a question.

"You say you went to Father Gleason's house purposely? Why did you go there?"

Still cringing on the floor, she lifted a white face and looked at him appealingly.

"I—I went there to—to see Veta Vlotsky to—to find out the truth," she faltered desperately. "I—I thought since my fa— since Mr. Vallerie lived with her father the girl would know and be able to tell me everything, but she didn't know."

"I see," he said. "You went there to see Veta and accidentally encountered the priest. Was that it?"

"Yes," she answered miserably. "Twice before I have met him by chance, and—and he has always warned me against you."

"Warned you against me?" he questioned sternly.

"Yes."

"The scoundrel! Where did you meet him?"

"Once on the street when I was going for a walk, and then the night of Alicia's party. Do you remember that night when you came back, after you had seen Pappia Ardeth and Horace Gebhard down stairs, and found me alone in the foyer in great agitation, and you asked if I

were ill, and I told you I—I was nervous and frightened because I—I had deceived you about the money you had given me for charity?"

"Yes, I remember," he said.

"Father Gleason had just left me when you came back to the foyer. I didn't tell you because I was afraid you would involve yourself in some difficulty that would probably result hazardingly for you, and God knows I wanted you safe!"

"But it was not right of you, Clematis, to keep it from me," he insisted strongly. "Did anybody else make it his business to warn you against me?"

"Yes. Horace Gebhard."

"A reprobate! Anybody else?"

"Carl Anthony——"

"Another reprobate! Anybody else?"

"Pappeia Ardeth."

"A woman of the dust! So they all warned you against me and you believed them!" he said with poignant sarcasm.

"No, I didn't want to believe them," she cried helplessly. "Believe me, I didn't want to think what they said was true! But, oh, Douglas, the idea of barter haunted me so," she wailed, then began to sob afresh.

Still sobbing bitterly, she dragged herself to him, lifted her arms slowly onward, upward, till she felt his strong manly hands.

"Take me back!" she cried hungrily. "Take me back!"

The man, holding her hands, bent down and folded his arms about her.

"I haven't given you up yet!" he said. Slowly drawing her to her feet and holding her in his arms, he lifted

her veil and laid his lips on hers. Oh how sweet it was to rest in the sheltering protection of his arms!

"Oh, Douglas, I have been so wicked, so wicked, and I love you," she said hoarsely, and she circled her arms about his neck and clung to him as if she would never let him go.

"And you don't want to be free?" he asked with strong emotion.

"No, no," she faltered brokenly. "Give me back my old place in your heart!"

"Come back, my wife," he said passionately. "I love you. I love you."

In that moment of bliss and sweet reconciliation, with heart throbbing against heart, lips pressed on lips, a sudden burst of sun shot golden through the gray mist and into the shoe shop, glorifying the two as if in loving benediction.

As Vallerie watched them in silent embrace, a paroxysm of fear and trembling seized him, and he gave one piercing harrowing shriek. Suddenly there was a flash, then a pistol shot rang out. Marling and Clematis startled by Vallerie's awful cry, sprang quickly apart, then looked up just in time to see him hurl a heavy last at Houlman, dashing from his hand the heavy weapon which fell to the floor in a crash.

When the smoke cleared and the noise of explosion died away, Joseph Houlman was nowhere to be seen. He had taken advantage of the moment and made good his escape.

"The scoundrel I'll get him yet!" gnashed Marling, picking up the pistol from the floor and placing it in his pocket. Then he went up to Clematis, took her in his arms and said in deep low tones:

"Come, let's go home now."

"Yes, let's go home," she repeated slowly and with a catch in her throat. Marling turned and led her toward the door, when a shrill little cry came from Vallerie.

"Wait," he exclaimed feverishly. "Wait! Don't go, Clematis, till I—till you have shown me mercy. There's only a little time, and then, then it may be too late. Forgive, child, forgive! Say you will," and the wretched man held out his shrivelled hands while the nerves in his almost withered face twitched as with pain. He was afraid to die with this sin on his soul.

Clematis waited a moment, then lifted her head and looked straight into the eyes of the man she loved.

"Forgive him, Clematis," he urged gently. "After all he is your father."

After all he was her father! Disengaging herself, she walked straight over to Vallerie, folded her arms about his shoulders then laid her lips on his withered cheek, her soft dark tendrils mingling with his snow white hair.

"You will forgive?" he breathed elatedly. "You will?"

"Yes," came the answer low and sweet.

Marling shaded his eyes with his hand as he watched them, father and daughter, then turned his back to keep down strong emotion.

"And you will come to live with us, father," said Clematis gently, still holding the paralyzed man in her arms, his head pillowed on her breast.

"No, no, child," he responded jerkily. "I—I can't do that. I—I will stay here an—and work, but," he added quickly, "you won't let me want for anything?"

"No," she assured him promptly. "You shall have everything."

"Even to my—my tablets?"

"Even to your tablets."

A curious triumphant smile played over the features of the wicked man, and a contemptuous sneer lurked in his eyes as abruptly extricating himself from Clematis and pushing her from him, he dropped back into his chair and burst into sudden laughter, which was checked almost instantly by a fit of violent hiccoughing.

Clematis glanced at Marling, who swung around at that moment and came rapidly toward her.

"It's the drug," said the man after a moment, lifting himself with powerful effort. "Simply the drug, that's all."

They waited for the paroxysm to pass, then when he seemed better, he sat up and looked about him consciously, then fixed his eyes on Clematis, glaring at her as if he could never shift his gaze from her face.

"You are a fortunate woman," he said harshly and with unconcealed contempt, his lips curling in a sneer; his fingers clawing nervously at each other. "You owe that man there your life, your perfect respectability. Believe in him, because all he has told you is the truth." He paused, then went on shrilly, "There is something—something you must know. I must make a—a confession. God! I can't die with a lie on my lips." At this point his breath seemed to fail him and, shivering violently, he dropped down in his seat, a deathlike pallor settling over his distorted features. Then, as if nerving himself to meet the crisis, his long, cadaverous hands reaching out and clawing at the emptiness about him, he burst out with dramatic emphasis: "*I am not your father! I am not Arthur Vallerie!*"

"Not my father?" gasped Clematis aghast. "Not my father!"

"Not her father?" exclaimed Marling in astonishment.

"No," he repeated sharply, gesticulating dramatically, "I am not Arthur Vallerie."

Startled by this confession, the two looked at each other in wondering amazement. Was the man crazy?

"Come, Clematis, let me get you out of this place," said Marling. "The fellow's demented."

"Demented?" exclaimed the other excitedly. "You are the fool," he added laughing gleefully. "I knew you from the moment I set eyes on you, but you didn't know me. I told you I was Arthur Vallerie, but I lied! I lied! I tell you now I am not Arthur Vallerie!"

"Well, who in the devil are you?" demanded Marling sternly.

"I—I well, that's no concern of yours," retorted the other curtly, then went on cynically. "Arthur Vallerie was my best friend and he married Althea Delmar, the woman I loved. The fact that she threw me over for him cut deeply and drove me to seek vengeance. Later I became addicted to morphia, and, goaded on by the drug, I revelled in my dreams of Nemesis. It was years afterwards, however, that I sought revenge; years after I had married, broken my wife's heart, who died, leaving me a boy to care for, but whom I cast upon the world. The brat has grown to manhood and recently I heard he—, but that's neither here nor there. Well, I found Vallerie living happily with his wife and daughter, and he was kind to me, generous to a fault, but I betrayed that friendship by kidnapping his only child, Clematis, then sold her to Joseph

Houlman, whom you imbursed largely to release and paid me handsomely, that you might have her by right and complete possession. Even to this day her parents believe her to be dead. I was never even suspected. I have come to this through drug and mental strain," pursued the man with harsh bitterness, glancing down at his dead limbs, but," he added after a moment with keen exultation as if Nemesis seemed sweet to him, "I've had my revenge! God! I've had my revenge!"

Clematis stood with her face in her muff, a sense of sickening horror coursing through her body and chilling her very blood. Marling stood rigidly, not daring to speak. Neither stirred, waiting for the man to finish his story.

"If she had remembered!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "I might have been condemned to the electric chair, or imprisoned for life! But she didn't remember," he gurgled dreamily as if to himself. "She became a victim of amnesia. Ah, it was sweet to be at liberty again after I had got rid of her; sweet to be back among my old friends. What a priceless thing is loyalty! Absence made no difference. My friends still had confidence in me as a man of affairs. Ah, to be trusted! For a time I put away my jar of tablets, forgot the wrong I had done Arthur Vallerie, and was once more the king of finance, the man whose name—whose name—was—was—"

"Warner Kent!" shot out Marling fiercely and with dramatic emphasis.

The fact that he was discovered, so startled the paralytic that he cringed low with a pitiable cry.

"Yes, I—I am Warner Kent," he admitted finally, and in scarcely audible tones. Then he went on with difficulty, the others listening, not daring to break his confes-

sion. When I went back into my world, I thought I had given up the drug for good, but no, it was only for a time; I became its veritable slave and see what it has done for me! Through it I have lost health, money, friends, and lastly I know not my own son! Randolph, my son, my boy! *And the sins of the father shall descend upon the children unto the third and fourth generation!*"

"Oh, now I remember! now I remember!" cried Clematis convulsed by a spasm of pain. "But my father and mother, where are they?" she exclaimed feverishly.

Warner Kent did not seem to hear, but lay sobbing in his chair, his head hung low on his breast.

"Tell me about my father and mother. Where are they?" she pleaded vehemently. For a moment there was a terrible suspense, then Warner Kent lifted his head and regarded her with the look of death in his eyes.

"They are—are—" he said weakly, "have—have two other children, a—a boy and a girl and—and—"

"But where are they?" clamored Clematis fiercely, almost beside herself.

"They are," gurgled the man, "they are in—in London, 29 Queen's Gardens."

"You are telling the truth?" demanded Marling with stern emphasis.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Kent. "Yes, I am telling the truth! I swear it is the truth! God knows I told you just a while ago I didn't want to die with a lie on my soul!" Then he burst out again, sobbing remorsefully, "Oh, my boy! God! My son!" and a moment later, in a violent spasm he fell forward on his face. Warner Kent was dead.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE weather being fine, Veta Vlotsky sat by an open window. The girl seemed much better; indeed, she had improved greatly under Pappeia's watchful and tender care. Sitting there her hands folded in her lap, ever and anon she glanced at Pappeia, who sat busily engaged sewing on a filmy white garment, her exquisite fingers working swiftly, making small and dainty stitches. She was finishing a christening robe for little Ardeth (named in her honor), Mrs. Stanson's tenth and last baby and was anxious to get it done for the important occasion. Pappeia Ardeth had done much for the Stantons; indeed, she had been a good friend to all of her neighbors. Now, as she worked, she hummed low under her breath.

"You are always industrious, Pina," said Veta, "always good, doing things for other people."

The elder woman smiled a little wistfully.

"No, not always good," she replied. "It is just a case of pity," she said. "I love the Stantons and am sorry for them, so I do what I can for them. Katie has her hands full with ten children, and the oldest not yet fourteen. I wish I were good, Veta," she added earnestly, "but the world calls me wicked and shuts me out from the good."

"But you are *good*," insisted the other vehemently, "and beautiful."

"Flatterer!"

"I am not flattering you, Pina. I mean what I say. I give praise where praise is due. You can't and don't doubt my sincerity. You know you don't. Why, Pina, you have been sister, best friend, all to me and—and I shall never forget."

The white fingers worked rapidly on the soft little garment.

"But I—I have done little, so very little for you, Veta dear," said Pappeia with a catch in her throat.

"You've been everything to me," repeated the girl.

"If they had convicted you and sent you to prison, I don't know what I should have done. I think I should have died."

"But they didn't," laughed the other. "I knew they wouldn't."

"How did you know?"

"By intuition," returned Pappeia, smiling radiantly. "Mr. Marling told me after the trial was over, and I had been acquitted, that no sane jury in the world would have convicted me; that there was no ground for conviction. It was a clear case of self-defense. I had to protect myself. Horace Gebhard was beastly drunk, and he struck at me to kill, so I shot him. I am free, Veta, free as you," and again she laughed, a certain freedom of happiness ringing in the tones. "Do you know," she added after a brief pause, "Mr. Marling favored me all he could and he was good, so very kind to me. He is a great man. Since he has been district attorney, he has done wonders for the city. He's cleaned Christian morally. That's what Douglas Marling has done!"

For a space there was silence. Pappeia made a few

last stitches, snapped the thread off in her teeth, then held up the snow-white garment for inspection.

"How do you like the christening robe for little Ar-deth, the tenth Stanton baby?" she asked with a smile, her lids drooping partially over her wonderful gray eyes.

"It's dear, perfectly dear, Pina," said Veta with interest and a glow of enthusiasm. "Such exquisite embroidery you've done on it and then the dainty lace. I know Mrs. Stanton will be proud of it and think it beautiful."

"When I go to Wilburton," said Pappeia abruptly and with deep earnestness, after a pause, "I am going to take you with me, Veta, dear. I don't intend to leave you here. I love you too well for that, dearie."

"If—if I go back with you, Pina," faltered Veta pathetically, "I—I will see father and perhaps he—he will care a—a little, just a little, and let me come back to the shoe shop."

"But I shall want you with me, dear heart," said Pappeia tenderly, looking down into the white twitching face, her arms about the girl's shoulders.

"But if—if father cares and—and wants me, you won't mind, Pina?" came in a half sob.

"No, I won't mind," returned the other gently, deeply conscious of emotion. "Of course I won't mind. I would love you just as much, no matter where you were. I want to see you happy. That's all. And you would be happy back in your father's shoe-shop?"

"Yes, indeed," returned the girl, her lips quivering, eyes filling with tears while her hands clutched Pappeia convulsively.

"That is all I want now, to be with father. I would go

back to him to-morrow, to-day, anytime, that is if—if he cared and—and wanted me.”

“Suppose he should come for you?” asked Pappeia softly, stroking the abundant dark hair. “If he should come to-day! Now!”

“If he should! If he should!” cried the girl convulsively. Then: “But why do you ask, Pina?” she demanded eagerly when she had grown calmer. “Why do you ask? Do you think he will come? Tell me. I want to know.”

“He may.”

“Do you think he—he will ever forgive?”

“There is nothing to forgive, you little dovie,” said Pappeia with tender sympathy.

“I—I know,” sobbed the other pitifully. “But I am blamed just the same.”

“What matters it,” replied Pappeia, “so you’re good and your father knows you are good? So don’t mind,” she continued earnestly, “don’t mind. ’Tis God, not man, who justifies all things. It’s spring and you are going back to Wilburton and pluck wild flowers in the woods. You are going back there to be happy again in your father’s shoe shop and be his own loving Veta. He will be happy, oh, so happy when you’re back and you will laugh and sing together all day long.”

“And we will catch butterflies like we used to in the little garden back of the shoe-shop,” laughed the girl in a sort of joyous excitement. “But then,” she supplemented sadly, lapsing into wistfulness, “it won’t be the same, not quite the same.”

“Why not, dearie?”

“Because,” she said with a break in her voice, “because

Johan, my dear, dear brother won't be there. He and I used to read together every evening and he was so fond of stories of King Arthur and his knights. He was a dear boy, Pina, such a dear boy and I loved him so. I—I will miss him when I go back."

"Of course you will miss him," said Pappeia gently, "but then if he knew, he would be glad you had gone back home. Think, Veta, what your going back will mean to your father! You will be once more his loving daughter, the light and comfort of his old age; why, you will be all, simply everything, to him."

"Do you think he will care and—and want me?" she faltered eagerly, almost vehemently. "Do you think he will?"

"Of course he will care and want you back, you dubious child," returned Pappeia exuberantly, her eyes shining, the smile still on her lips. Then she laughed outright from sheer impulse and gave Veta a delicate pinch on the cheek. "Of course he will, you foolish dear," she insisted emphatically. "Why, he loves you and wants you back this very moment."

For a space Veta Vlotsky sat staring at the woman before her, gazing wonderingly, sensing something unusual, then she burst out in sudden excitement:

"How do you know, Pina? Have you seen my father? Tell me! Have you seen him?"

"No."

"Then who has seen him?" cried the girl impatiently under stress of emotion. "Tell me, Pina! Don't keep me in suspense. *Don't!* Has anybody seen father?"

"Yes, Robson."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Did he go to see father?"

"Yes."

"Why did he go?"

"For your sake, dearie."

"Robson has always been so kind to me," pursued Veta in agitation. "Did *you* send him? Oh, I know, I *know*!" she went on precipitately. Oh, Pina, Pina, it was just like you to do it; always thinking of me and doing things for others!" Then, after a moment, she half whispered: "Has he come? Has—has Robson brought father back with him?"

"And if he has? What then?"

"Oh, if he has!" exclaimed the younger woman breathlessly. "Where is my father?"

"Here, dearie, to take you home."

"To take me home!" sighed Veta, and she dropped back into her chair, smiling happily, an infinite peace stealing over her face. Ah, what rapt divinity lay in her eyes!

The elder woman watched her with deep, yearning tenderness, waiting. Then, in the silence, there came the sound of feet on the wooden stairs outside and a moment later the door opened and an old man entered led by a little child, Pina's boy. The old man stopped short in the middle of the room and waited.

Hermann Vlotsky was stooped, bent from age, toil and sorrow; his hair was scant and almost white; his Semitic features more sharply defined, while in his deep eyes, there was the hungry look for a daughter's wonderful love. When he saw Veta, he stood there silent, hands shaking, lips quivering breathing hard.

"There she is," said little Jean, glancing up wistfully.

"There is Veta. Aren't you glad to see her? Aren't you going to speak to her?" Then, turning, he said: "Veta, here is your father."

"Father," she cried, "Father!" and running to him, flung her arms around his neck, clinging to him frantically. Without a word, he caught her to him, holding her against his breast, sobbing, his face in her hair.

Her eyes, filling with tears, and a great lump gathering in her throat, Pappeia Ardeth took her boy by the hand and led him silently from the room, leaving father and daughter alone together.

"My daughter, my daughter," said Vlotsky, after he had recovered himself a little, "Come back to your old father who wants, loves you, and who has always loved you."

"But I am not worthy," she sobbed.

"You are worthy. You are all I have in the world now, Veta," he added tremulously, "and I love you and I want you back home."

"Oh, father, I'm so glad you've come!" she exclaimed rapturously.

"I have come, dear child," he said, "to take you home!"

CHAPTER XVII.

TO-NIGHT the house in Phryne Street was aglow with lights. The parlor, frugally furnished, was a veritable floral bower, roses and daffodils vying in beauty and mingling their fragrance in delicious perfume. On the plain oaken table in the center of the room, were a tiny rabbit's foot mounted in silver and a miniature golden horse-shoe set in pearls. The two men, standing by the table, examined the trinkets, looked at each other, then back at the trifles.

"What are these for and what does this all mean?" inquired Father Gleason curiously.

"It means—," blurted out Anthony significantly.

"Madam is giving a dinner," said Robson quietly, leaning against the side of the door.

"Madam is giving a dinner?" echoed the priest wonderingly. "I had planned to dine sumptuously at my apartments at the Clarendon," he said turning to Anthony.

"Yes, sir. You—you see, sir—" continued Robson.

"What's she giving a dinner for?"

"It's—it's—well,—it's a—a surprise for—"

"A surprise?"

"Yes, sir. For you, sir."

"For me?"

"Yes, sir. She's giving the dinner in your honor, sir. You see—it's—it's your birthday, sir, and she—"

"Why, so it is Robson, so it is," chuckled the priest exuberantly. "To be sure it is my birthday, I am fifty-

nine years old. Think of it, Anthony! Fifty-nine! and what is to-day?"

"Friday, sir."

"Friday? Ugh, rather an unlucky day, eh, Anthony?"

"Rather drawled Anthony, slightly arching his eyebrows.

"The horse-shoe and the rabbit's foot will—er—perhaps offset the bad luck," casually observed Robson, appearing not to have noticed Anthony's lifting of the brows. "Madam got them to bring you fortune. Who knows but they will insure you some sort of—of luck?"

"Who knows?" rejoined the priest, toying with the trinkets. "Perhaps they will. What do you say, Anthony?"

"I suppose so," answered the young man indifferently. Then, dropping into a chair beside the table, he crossed his legs, lit a cigarette and blew a few whiffs of vapor, watching them wreath and vanish into emptiness. "Have one," he urged, extending the dainty box of tobacco sticks.

"Thanks," returned his host, complying, at the same time seating himself opposite. "There's nothing like a smoke for consolation."

"Consolation!" echoed Anthony, and he laughed harshly. "Good Lord! We're in need of consolation," he supplemented vehemently when Robson had discreetly departed.

"Don't blubber over the past. It's the present and the future."

"Future? Man, what a travesty! We've got no future. Our system—is dead, dead as June. Douglas Marling's shut up all our cabarets and gambling stalls,

and he's got us hedged round about like the walls of Jericho, and there's no way out, if we stay on here. We'd better pull out."

"When?"

"To-night," responded Anthony huskily, leaning forward on the table, his face in his companion's, his breath coming hurriedly.

"To-night?"

"That's what I said, *To-night!*"

"Where shall we go?" asked the priest anxiously.

"Anywhere," replied the other savagely. "We shall go to hell if we stay here! Come, don't be such an obstinate fool," he ground out, rising to his feet and glancing at the clock.

"What! Now!"

"Yes, *now!* If we go now we've time to catch the 7:10 train for Canada."

Deep lines furrowed the brow of Father Gleason, and he seemed greatly disturbed. His head bent forward, his eyes staring in a strained way as if he would peer into the future, it seemed that the end had come. Anthony was right. There was nothing left but to pull out of Christian at once. A few hours would make but little difference. Why not take the midnight train for the West, or sail for Plymouth in the morning? There was a Hamburg-American boat going at seven and there would probably be no difficulty in securing passage.

"Why precipitate matters?" he said nervously. "Why not wait later and take the 12:30 train? Or—"

"Wait!" exclaimed Anthony, sinking back into his chair. "The devil! We've waited too long already. My God! man, don't you see how things are going! Pappaia

At this point there was a terrific ring at the front door bell. Jarred by the sound of it, the two men leaped to their feet and glared at each other.

"Don't be alarmed," said Pappeia, a soft note in her voice. "It's only Beverly, Vance Beverly, you know."

The men looked relieved, then laughed at the situation. Anthony twirled round on his heels once or twice, lit another cigarette and puffed smoke vigorously through his nose while venerable Father Gleason counted the beads of his rosary and muttered an oath under his breath.

Veering gracefully, Pappeia extended her hand to the tall, angular man who at that moment entered the room.

"How do you do, Mr. Beverly?" she said cordially.

"How do you do," he responded abstractedly, taking her hand automatically, then letting it go. He seemed rather distressed. His hair was dishevelled and his eyes stared with a peculiar blank expression, while the leanness of his body was accentuated by the dusty brown suit he wore. He seemed to have gone down terribly of late.

"Hello, Bevie," said Anthony indifferently. Father Gleason, toying with his beads, scarcely nodded.

Beverly did not even bow his head in salutation, but stood gazing intently at Pappeia, his mind bent upon one thing, and that was to see Veta Vlotsky. For months she had shadowed him like a spectre, and he had planned to kill her, and then send a bullet through his own brain, thus putting to flight the terrible obsession of fear. When Pappeia invited him for the evening, he accepted readily hoping to execute his infamous design. Now as he gazed from one to another, he felt a sort of keen excitement electrify his whole body.

"Where is Veta?" he demanded abruptly, in a shaking, rasping voice.

"The girl's not here," replied the priest bluntly.

"Not here?" gasped Beverly in disappointment. "She is here and you won't let me see her," he thundered furiously.

"The girl's not here, I tell you, you blamed idiot," returned the priest sternly. "She's gone back to Wilburton." Vance Beverly seemed amazed at this information and passed his fingers absently through his hair.

"Gone back to Wilburton?" he muttered dazedly.

"Yes. She went with her father."

"When did she go?" the man asked shrilly.

"This morning," answered Pappeia.

"It's a lie, an—an infernal lie. She is—is here and you won't let me see her," he raged again, then his nerves gave way and he sobbed convulsively. "Yo-you are—are coddling me."

"Catch up there, and stop that blithering," said Anthony roughly.

"Why did you ask that fellow here?" demanded Father Gleason in an undertone to Pappeia.

"I wanted him because," she went on in dulcet tones, "the Commercial League is dead, and you three are the last of the ring. Besides, it's your birthday, and I wanted it to be the most *memorable* day of your life."

"Ah, thank you, Pina," said the priest. "That is kind of you to celebrate *my* birthday and to want to make it—"

"*The most memorable day of your life,*" she repeated with emphasis.

"Dinner is served, madam," announced Robson.

"Very well, Robson," she answered quietly, meeting his glance, then letting the lids droop over her eyes. "Come, let's go into dinner," she gurgled, and, taking Beverly's arm she proceeded to lead the way to the dining-room. When the two had advanced several paces, Father Gleason caught Anthony by the arm and held him back, betraying excitement.

"I do believe you are right, Anthony," he said huskily. "I do believe she and—and that fellow Robson are tricking us."

"Then if you think that," said Anthony peremptorily, "let's pull out now!"

"No, not now," said Robson in even tones, stepping up at that moment. "Madam is waiting for you in the dining-room."

Without further delay, the two men went in to dinner.

The table was set for four, simple and attractive, a dainty white cloth covering its smooth round surface, in the center a vase of pale forget-me-nots, while the places were marked by tiny horse-shoes of the same delicate flower.

"Forget-me-nots," muttered the priest significantly when he had dropped into his chair. Pappeia and Beverly were already seated at the table.

"Ah, forget-me-nots!" exclaimed Anthony, seating himself and, taking up the floral emblem of good luck, he examined critically then slipped it into an inside pocket.

"Yes, flower of remembrance," pursued Pappeia in her liquid voice, and she laughed musically.

"Flower of memories," gnashed Beverly between heavy jaws. Catching up the tiny horse-shoe, he crushed it in his large hands, scattering the fragile petals to the floor.

The situation was strained, dramatic, and to relieve the tenseness of things, Anthony shot an olive across the table at Beverly, who made an ugly grimace, the missile having struck him in the face, which created laughter.

Ugh, don't like them green sour pickles, eh, Bevie?" he queried with a chuckle.

"No, not when they are served in that style," returned Beverly with some asperity. This occasioned another burst of laughter.

"Oh, I like them any old way," continued Anthony crunching one between his teeth. Then, turning to Father Gleason, he added with evident sarcasm: "Aren't you going to give thanks for what we're about to expect?"

"Not to-night," replied the priest curtly. "We might meet with very un—un—well unpleasant surprises," he added, directing his glance at Pappeia, who met it squarely.

"Some men have the intuition of a woman," she said ambiguously, toying with the stem of her wine glass.

There fell a sudden silence and all concerned began to partake of the inviting blue-points before them.

"Where's the kid?" abruptly remarked Father Gleason when he had swallowed the remaining oyster and had gulped down his red wine. "More wine," he said to Robson, extending his glass.

"Oh, Jean?" answered Pappeia, looking up from her plate. "He wanted very much to stay for dinner this evening, but I wouldn't let him. I sent him down to play with the Stanton children. He was quite satisfied, however, when I let him carry his Teddy Bear and Billy 'Possum."

"Now that the Teddy Bear, Billy 'Possum and Bull

Moose have disappeared," observed Beverly, with a falter in his voice after having drained off a whiskey fizz, his head lightly tilted to an angle, "I wonder what there'll be next."

"Chanticleer of course," gurgled Pappeia.

"More fizzes!" called the priest loudly.

"Chanticleer?" drawled Anthony disgustedly. "Rot and nonsense! We've had enough of petticoat rule."

"Petticoat rule?" roared the priest. "You blamed idiot! Chanticleer's a rooster."

This provoked rounds of laughter. Anthony flushed scarlet and his eyes flamed.

"A fool knows that," he retorted when the merriment had subsided. "But didn't the pheasant hen cover up Chanticleer with her wing to prevent him from crowing because of his man-like conceit, he believed the sun wouldn't rise unless he crowed! But the sun *did* rise! When he came out from under her wing to herald the coming of the morning, he found day in full swing, wonderful, glorious, and the pheasant hen, cackling in his face. What's that I'd like to know but petticoat government?"

"Chanticleer proved a rank failure in this country," observed the priest gleefully, "which goes to show that woman here is the under-dog and that suffrage and all other of woman's silly notions will be snowed under."

It was now Anthony's turn to roar.

"Snowed under," echoed Anthony gruffly. "Don't you believe that! Why, man, you're off track. Women are on top and we're the under-dog, and what they will do to us will be plenty. *You'll see!* Isn't that so,

Pina?" he asked, turning to the woman, who sat sipping her champagne.

"After all, Anthony, you are a friend of woman," she said purringly.

"No. I am not, by Jove," he answered sharply. "It's woman," he added viciously, glaring her full in the face, "who achieves the down-fall of man; and now," he added significantly, "it lies with a *woman* to—to trick and betray!"

Here Vance Beverly and Father Gleason laughed loudly and Anthony's words were lost in the noise of shuffling feet and jingling of glasses. Under his scathing utterance, Pappeia sat calmly tasting her champagne, a smile on her lips, her eyes soulful, wonderful as the hidden depths of violets meeting Anthony's glance. Then she, too, laughed, joining in the hilarity of Beverly and the priest.

"Champagne, sir?" asked Robson, stepping up at the moment.

"No champagne for me, but whiskey fizz," answered Father Gleason with a flourish of the hand.

"Fizz for me," growled Anthony.

"And fizz for me," echoed Beverly.

"Ah, champagne for me," rippled Pappeia, face flushed, lips parted and eyes mirroring iridescent lights.

At this point she rose from the table and would have passed from the room, but Father Gleason detained her.

"Wh—where are yo-you going, Pina?" he demanded.

"I must see about Jean, you know," she answered, her lips curling betwitchingly like pink rose petals.

"Yo-you are coming back?"

"Yes, oh yes. Presently."

"And surprise us with—with other surprises?" queried Anthony, his words coming a little thickly.

No answer came back to the question, for the woman glided swiftly from the room, closing the door behind her. When she had gone, there followed jokes, laughter and rattling of glasses, the three men about the table finally bursting into song, singing loudly, each on a different key and painfully out of time, but repeating the same lines pulsing with love, love, love.

"Toasts!" yelled Beverly, leaping into his chair and balancing himself unsteadily, his glass poised high above his head. "Here's to another birthday like this!" he vociferated blatantly. The other two, quickly following suit, managed to plant their feet on the bottom of their chairs, tilting their glasses and nearly emptying the contents.

"Success to the League!" ejaculated Father Gleason.

"To the chief of the pirates!" cried Anthony. Then they all drank, spilling much, between paroxysms of laughter and uproarious cheers.

In the midst of this revelry the door swung open and Pappeia Ardeth burst into the room attended by Douglas Marling, Grey Seaborn, Christian's chief of police and seven of his cops.

Thus taken unawares, the men on chairs stood motionless between terror and astonishment. Finally, as if impelled by a sudden notion, they leaped onto the table, crashing their empty glasses to the floor. For a fearful second the table rocked under them, then collapsed precipitating the three, and shattering the vase of forget-me-nots.

"There they are," said Pappeia lightly to the blue coats,

a ripple in her voice and waving one fair arm toward the men upon the floor. "And gentlemen, she added sweetly, "they are at your service."

Instantly the men on the floor scrambled to their feet making frantic efforts to escape.

"If you move another inch," thundered the police chief, "I'll shoot down every one of you." A pistol shot rang out. A cop had fired and hit the ceiling.

"Damn it! What did I tell you," roared Anthony, mad as a blood hound.

"Damn it! What *did* you tell me," gnashed the priest with emphasis, struggling fiercely as if he would break the manacles that bound his wrists.

"I told you to put not faith in woman," cried Anthony hopelessly. "I begged you to leave Pappeia Ardeth alone. See what she and that fellow, Robson, have *done* for us! They have brought us to the devil!"

"Devils! Traitors! exclaimed the priest in frenzy, his cheeks red and puffed, eyes flaming like furnaces. "Spies!"

"Spies!" hissed the woman back at him. "No! Good God! no!" Then she went on with feverish intensity; "You are the devils, traitors, spying against youth! Did you think I was going to stand idly by and not expose you? What did you take me for, a fool, a dumb nonentity? You are *caught* at last," she added hoarsely, "and by me, a woman, and, God, if that be treachery, then let me be traitor!"

In that moment of intensity, lifting her voice in behalf of young manhood and young womanhood, there was something gloriously beautiful about Pappeia Ardeth, something truly noble, divine! When she finished speak-

ing, there was a dead silence, then, a cop letting a club fall heavily to the floor, broke the stillness.

"Come Seaborn," ordered Marling, "we're wasting time. "Take your prisoners and be off with them."

"Don't touch me," commanded the priest, a savage, hideous expression distorting his features, terrifying the policeman who had collared him. The cop drew back instantly. "Don't put your dirty, grafty hands on me," he threatened, showing his strong yellow molars like dragon's teeth. "I paid you for protection, paid you handsomely, you and your chief there and now you turn against me, smite the hand that fed you, housed you! And this is how you show your gratitude! Gratitude be hanged! Damn you! Conscience! My God! Police have no conscience! Confound you! What means this arrest?" he demanded, turning to Marling and Seaborn. It's an insult, a damnable insult to the Church I'm a priest, and you've no right to——"

"Priest!" ejaculated Seaborn jeeringly. None of your infernal lies on me," I know you! There's no use hiding any longer behind a priest's robe and rosary. You've done now with fake priesthood, and fake marriages! Come, there's no use lying you're *Joseph Houlman*, chief of the *Commercial League*!"

"Damn you!" he hissed hoarsely. "You've no right to arrest me, insult a—a venerable old man, a—a priest and——"

"Come, there's no use," cut in Marling severely, "denying you are *Joseph Houlman*. That man there, Milton Farnham, once Judge of the criminal court!" he added in the same heated tones, pointing at Beverly, "like the

devil you are, has led a dual existence. He is wanted on the charge of murder!"

"Murder!" exclaimed Anthony in amazement.

"Yes, murder," grunted Christian's chief of police bluntly. "He killed Johan Vlotsky, Veta Vlotsky's brother!"

Beverly broke down and gave a hoarse cry.

"No, I—I didn't," he wailed. "I—I did—didn't kill the—boy. He came——"

"Shut up there, Farnham or Beverly as you call yourself," commanded the police chief. "We want none of your lies! You murdered him that night we raided 'The Morning-glory'! You thought nobody saw you, that no one would——"

"Wh—who saw me?" he jerked out, shivering from head to foot.

"It was——," said Robson meeting a pair of violet-tinted eyes.

"I!" came in a woman's ringing tones. "Pappeia Ardeth! I saw him murder Johan, then stalk stealthily into the dance-hall. I saw murder, fire, everything! God! Shall I forget that night?" she exclaimed with a shudder, covering her face with her hands.

"Why didn't you notify the authorities at once," questioned the district attorney.

"I waited," returned Pappeia slowly and in emphatic tones, removing her hands from her face, and looking straight at him, "because I wanted to trap these men, into your hands!"

"Spies!" hissed the priest savagely, gazing hideously at Pappeia, beautiful in her gown of white and silver, her eyes flashing, shading from violet to gray flame. The

priest still made no admission but stood moistening his lips staring back in angry defiance, bending down he caught the rosary in between his teeth, and crushing a drop, severed the string, the beads scattering in every direction. Then he took the cross and flung it from him, it falling to the floor with a clicking sound. Motionless he gazed for a moment upon the sacred emblem, then bowed his head low upon his breast in guilt and capitulation.

"And now, gentlemen," said Pappeia, graciously, to the men of law, smiling with exquisite witchery, "since you have no further need of my services, I will bid you *au revoir* as I am leaving to-night with my little boy for Wilburton. I am going back to my father. If, however, you will have need of me, you will find me there. Good night, gentlemen, good night."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ocean rippled and sparkled like an opal as the sun, seeming to dip in the limpid waters, sank in the west. Marling and Clematis paced up and down the promenade deck of the Corona as she steamed on her way to Liverpool.

"I can scarcely wait to get to London to see father and mother," mused Clematis as she and Marling halted and leaned against the rail.

"Sailing away on our honeymoon," he laughed exuberantly. "Ah, Clematis, we are happy," he added vibrantly.

"It's love," she half whispered, lifting her eyes to his. "Love points the way," she continued in deep tones. "It makes us forget wrongs, compassionate the fallen and keeps us in the right path of duty. Love shows us not the ugly but the beautiful things in life. Love makes angels of us all."

THE END

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